

In the Sight of Many

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In the Sight of Many

by [Methrindal](#)

Summary

As the Great Hare descends upon the Sanctuary, a desperate Subaru seeking a certain half-elf finds refuge in the Witch's Tomb. Broken, stricken of his power to redo, and doomed to a twisted timeline—he struggles to keep going. Yet, with her by his side, he finds himself unwittingly walking a thin blade between harmony and perdition.

Notes

Title: *In the Sight of Many*

Rating: Explicit (E) for language, violence, mature and dark themes, graphic sexual content.

Category/Genre: multi-part novel, plot; grimdark fantasy, romance, drama.

Characters: [Subaru](#), [Emilia](#); other minor and major Re:Zero characters; a few plot-related OCs.

Timeline/Spoiler Warning: AU Alternate Timeline after Chapter 68, Arc 4 of the Web Novel/Episode 11, Season 2 of the anime. Follows the canon events of the web novel, so minor differences between that and the anime are present. Diverges into entirely new plot and intrigue following these events. Spoiler-free story, and if any future characters or events are referenced, they are done so tastefully as not to become a spoiler in itself.

Summary: The end of the world is on the horizon. After witnessing the deaths of Petra,

Beatrice, Rem and all those dear to him, Subaru is stricken of his power to redo and banished to a cursed timeline of death and destruction. However, Emilia, the reason alone for his existence and why he draws breath still, awaits unknowingly of the horrible events in Echidna's Tomb. With no other choice, Subaru takes his first steps toward a new journey featuring: sorrowful evocations, angst, hurt/comfort, high adventure, shattered memories, uncertain personas, a rise to power, a towering fall, innocent love, sex and Emilia.

A/N: 1) This story is written in such a way that it assumes character development. As well as taking place in an alternate timeline of despair, and the result being future events have changed dramatically, characterization will reflect such alterations. No direct content from Arc 5 or 6 or any of Tappei's future works will appear henceforth in this story, although there may be one or two characters minorly referenced and utilized.

2) Ekaterina016 is my editor and has been an immense help and lifeline with editing this colossal story. Without boring you further, I sincerely hope you enjoy reading this work, as it is my love letter to the Re:Zero world.

Prologue - Under the Mercy of Few

*In those silent shades of grey
I will find a place
To escape the endless night
To find a new sun*

He had been running for his life for some time before he reached the tomb. The only sounds which filled the passageway he intruded upon were that of his incessant panting and the pounding thump of his heart against his chest.

With unblinking pupils so dark they appeared almost lifeless, he stared down the ancient halls of old. Covering his mouth in discomfort, there was such a sickness in his stomach he could taste the bile which rose into his throat. Nonetheless, he pressed on, dragging his tired and battered body through the entrance of the ancient tomb, enveloping him in its welcomed shadow.

He fell to his knees pitilessly, uncaring of their condition, as they were iced over to the point of near-uselessness. His mind, on the verge of insanity, was equally dull and depressant.

He knew she was *here*, but his vision was failing him.

Hazily, he stood with the last bit of strength he could muster, and crept in the direction of the light. His clumsy footsteps thudded around, bouncing off the winding corridor. Then, as the echoes faded, he finally heard it:

"—*Subaru?*"

That wonderful crystalline chime beckoned to his faded senses like an eagerly-awaited dinner bell. He followed the direction from whence it rung so beautifully. As he had done so, he felt his strength return to him, and the heat of his body envelope him in a brilliant blaze of fire.

He knew just *who* this familiar and stirring voice belonged to.

As if to respond, he went to speak her precious name, but no discernible words came from him. Yet, after a moment, he heard soft footsteps approaching him swiftly. Sure enough, before him was laid bare a most serene and innocent sight. The one standing there was a silver-haired, doe-eyed half-elf—the very reason and source of his plight.

His weary eyes narrowed. He could tell she had been through hell; her hair was disheveled, and the pendant at the base of her neck was grayed over and cracked at the base. She hugged tightly his beloved jacket which had travelled with him to this new world, as if it were he himself. Likewise, she bore an expression of both deep confusion and unabashed innocence.

Emilia's lips curved to a small smile. "Subaru, I've missed you *sooo* much," she said with a playful and lively tone—making it clear she was unaware of what was transpiring just outside the tomb. "I was *sooo* lonely without you... but I *knew* you would come back to me. You've never left me alone before, so I figured if I worked hard, you would come back to see me as soon as possible!"

Her beautiful sound roused him, but he found that speech was difficult:

"Emilia..." Subaru eked out weakly, his hoarse voice failing him.

Blanketed by darkness, she was not privy to his condition, before he finally moved into the

moonlight.

Emilia let out a small cry as she dropped his jacket and rushed to his side to take hold of his hand. Taking in every detail of Subaru's state, she again gasped softly at the severity of his condition, and enfolded him in a protective embrace. Her amethyst orbs glistened in the moonlight which pierced its way through the darkness of the tomb, and her face was contorted in a worried manner, much like that of a mother concerned about her child.

"Oh, *my* lovely Subaru..." she whispered, as she stroked his hair gently. "You just feel *sooo* cold... If you stay here with me, I'll make sure to keep you warm!" An uncharacteristic giggle escaped from her rosy lips, and she smiled as a small blush spread across her cheeks.

Subaru felt himself going light headed from the feeling of her pressed against him, and he wanted nothing more than to bury himself into the safe confines of her alluring bosom. His eyes lidded once, twice—almost shutting for good—but suddenly, he realized what he came here to do. He shook his head furiously to banish the exhaustion from his being.

Emilia gripped his hand tighter, but was surprised when she felt his weak grip grow stronger. The bitter cold, which so silenced him before, dissipated at an alarming rate.

"Let's g-get away fr-from here, Emilia," Subaru stuttered with his newfound voice. "We have to go, now!" Without a word, he stood, took her hand almost violently and began to turn on his heel towards the exit of the tomb.

Barring any questioning, she followed quietly, knowing now wasn't the time for argument. The brevity of the situation was lost to her, but she felt an unfathomable amount of pain and suffering emanating from Subaru's every movement.

Pensively, she gently squeezed Subaru's hand in the most tender and apologetic way she could. In a subtle moment, she noticed Subaru turn his head slightly, and for a moment his eye contacted hers. His hazel brown eyes clashed almost without notice with her swirling purple orbs. Under his gaze, she felt his fatigued and heavy gaze push her down with unbearable weight, before he faced forward and continued his march of solitude.

As the pair exited the tomb, they were met with a cold chill which sent a horrendous shiver down Emilia's spine. Snow graced the ground, and the trees were frozen in an otherworldly manner. She knew such a spell had to have been conjured by someone of both considerable skill and power. Even so, the trickling fall of snow was noticeably fading, signifying an end to the inclement spell. Yet, even in its waning stage, the freezing air remained howling wildly.

Subaru stood silently with the half-elf's hand still entrapped by his vice grip. He appeared to be concentrating his senses for something, but Emilia didn't quite understand how or why things were happening as they were. And so he stayed there, wordlessly listening for something she did not understand—but he only heard the shrill call of the whistling wind.

"We still have time..." Subaru said, his voice dark and low. "Here, I brought something for you." Turning to Emilia, he reached into his pack and withdrew a familiar cloak. It was Emilia's old heirloom that Roswaal had given her when they first met, adorned with purple cat ears and all.

"M-my cloak?" Emilia questioned with a voice just as surprised as the look on her face. "I thought we had lost it sometime ago—where did you find it?"

"Sorry, Emilia, but there's no time for explanations," he responded curtly. With an outstretched hand, he offered the cloak to her. "Take this and put it on, it may very well be our only way out of

here."

Emilia nodded gingerly and gently took the cloak from his hands. She wrapped it around her shoulders and pulled the hood over her head, concealing her peculiar silver hair and pointy ears.

The cloak was specially imbued with powerful magic to obscure the identity of those who wore it, except to those she desired to reveal it to. In this case, only Subaru would be able to tell who exactly she was, and to others, she'd appear to be just a regular human girl.

Subaru took her hand again. "Come on, Emilia," he said, an unmistakable panic laden in his voice. "We have to hurry before it's too late!" Without warning, he dashed into the snow, jerking her along with him.

As they ran, Emilia looked around. In the distance, she heard an ear-splitting shriek, possibly from some sort of demon beast. The smell of smoke was heavily laden in the air, as was the baleful scent of death. She felt Subaru grip her hand even tighter, and then he began to pace himself even faster than before, which was already almost to a sprint. Through the heavy snow, it was difficult to traverse indeed, but even so they kept running, and running, out into the moonlit night sky under the infinitum of stars.

Every now and then, Emilia would hear a blood-curdling scream coming from the dark, white-covered forest which surround them. But Subaru would pay no heed, nor would he divert his attention from wherever he was taking her. This behavior was so unlike the Subaru she knew she even felt a little scared... though not for herself, but for him, for what he was carrying on his shoulders alone and without her help.

It pained her heart to be as utterly useless as she was.

Her breath became more and more labored as they made their way against the icy cool current of air biting at her lungs, threatening to stifle its function. Breathing was indeed becoming a difficult affair, and no doubt her companion was faring even worse than she, but something not unlike pure madness drove him to fight through his ailments.

After some time, bodily movements became almost impossible as the elements bore down on them with an utterly heinous fury. Even so, Subaru's eyes widened sharply; his goal was in sight.

They began to approach the magical barrier of the Sanctuary.

Subaru bit back a curse he so wanted to let out. He prayed the cloak would mask Emilia's existence as a half. It was the only chance they had, and it was the last-ditch effort he so haphazardly came up with in his madness. Maybe, just maybe, this one idea would come to fruition. In this hell he had been damned to, there was still one last glitter of hope left... and he held her hand so tightly, channeling every ounce of pain and suffering he had endured into her. It was unintentional, but he couldn't mask it any longer. He felt like crying, and yet his eyes could not shed any tears because they were so dry and bitten from the icy wind. Nevertheless, he gripped Emilia's small, frail hand even harder, and pressed on.

As she passed through the invisible barrier, Emilia began to feel light-headed, but even so, she kept her composure and followed his footsteps carefully. It was evident the cloak she wore found itself at odds with the magical nature of the barrier erected around the Sanctuary. Normally, a half who dared to come close to the barrier would find themselves lost to the world, as the barrier kept their spirits trapped forever inside. It appeared the cloak really did mask her presence to the magical barrier. It was imbued with a powerful enchantment indeed.

For the first time, Subaru smiled to himself, but out of view of Emilia so she couldn't see. It wasn't a smile of happiness or joy, as he couldn't muster to bring himself to feel any such thing after the events which had transpired. It was a smile of sheer and utter *turmoil*, at the fact they had the hope to escape the bitter cold death the rest of the people of the Sanctuary were suffering.

And the depths of his own sufferings were almost unbearable. Subaru mourned his friends. Truthfully, he didn't want to go on living anymore—but he couldn't leave Emilia to die alone in that lonely tomb, and to suffer a death so brutal and maniacal as to be eaten alive by the Great Hare. It was one he had once experienced, and one he couldn't bear to let happen to the innocent girl he swore to protect.

He felt a weight pull him back, impeding his step. Turning to face what kept him from their salvation, he saw Emilia, almost unconscious from exhaustion. She had collapsed into the snow, clearly struggling to breathe.

Subaru, not fairing much better himself, grimaced deeply, and knelt beside her shivering body. Even with the cloak, she still suffered the effects of hypothermia. He was almost in the same shape himself, but he had grown a little more accustomed to the devilish chill than she had. He looked to the north. Behind them was the Sanctuary, a killing field for the Great Hare. They had to get away from here, *fast*, lest the vile famished Hare seek them out as well.

His loss of the power to redo—so suddenly and inexplicably, damned him to this forsaken purgatory forever. He was powerless now; he couldn't redo, and he couldn't just go back and fix things like before. He was just a normal human being, and it was because of *this* he couldn't throw away his life so recklessly. This was the final chance, the final timeline, as doomed as it was. He had to make the best of it anyway. And so long as his silver-haired maiden still drew breath, he couldn't resign himself to the sweet surrender of death so easily as Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers did. No, he would find a way to make things right, even with his back against the wall such as it was. He had to be that way—he couldn't give up, if only to respect the memory of those whom he lost.

He *had* to protect her. He *had* to save her. *He had to!*

There was no other reason for his existence now.

Channeling what little strength he had left, Subaru braced her motionless body and hoisted her above his shoulders. Luckily enough, her petite frame did not prove to be an insurmountable task for even the likes of Subaru to accomplish. He took a step and stumbled, catching himself before he fell. Cursing to himself, he tried again, trudging slowly through the snow, and yet again taking another step, and another step... and another. And as he struggled, Subaru etched an oath to his soul.

"I will..." he whispered, his voice hoarse under labored breath.

What came next was unintelligible amongst the howling shriek of the blistering wind.

After some time, the moonlit sky began to give way to sunrise, and the horrible night was suddenly vanquished in a brilliant maroon red, which began to peek itself over the green trees. By now, the snow had all but melted, as the magic which created the environment had long since been silenced. One could even hear birds chirping and other wildlife creating their respective morning sounds. It was as if they had stepped into another world entirely—a peaceful green world opposite of the bleak, cold hell they found themselves entrapped in just the night before.

As the warmth returned to the air in brilliant style, Subaru breathed a deep sigh of relief. He hadn't

seen a sign of the Great Hare since they made it across the Sanctuary Barrier. He wasn't sure why the Hare had ceased its brutal attack, but such ruminations were unimportant now. He was just glad to have escaped that hellish nightmare, as selfish and inconsiderate as it was.

Subaru didn't know how long he had been walking. He didn't quite care. Even as his body should have shut down from exhaustion long ago, he kept going, kept willing himself to not give up. He still carried the motionless girl on his back. By now, she was softly sleeping, as he could feel the tickle of her even breath on the back of his neck. Her arms were wrapped gently around him, and he carried her from underneath her legs. He would have liked to rest, but honestly, he did not want to disturb her peaceful sleep, so locked away from this terrible world.

Travelling in directions unknown, their potential destination could have been anywhere. It didn't matter though, for all he knew, anywhere was better than where they were coming from. As the cool air had completely dissipated, Subaru had decided maybe it was time for a little rest. Taking a short path off the road, he found some soft green grass under a large old tree, adorned with winding moss hanging from its many branches. He gently knelt and lowered the sleeping girl in his arms down to the ground, laying her on the velvety smooth grass.

The shade provided by the tree was calming indeed. There was a gentle breeze in the air, so much unlike the violent blistering wind from the night before. The weather was agreeable, and the sun began to peek over the trees of the beautiful forest.

The boy breathed in deeply, absorbing the atmosphere, and let out a haggard sigh. After a moment, he looked down at the sleeping beauty. Her elegant, rounded visage made it appear nothing had ever transpired at all. Indeed, she was unaware of the events which had happened, and she had invested her trust in Subaru to take care of her, even though she didn't fully understand why he had taken her the way he did. She had put her innermost trust in him, and for that, he felt a warmth overtake his body at the realization she had surrendered herself to him in all her innocence.

"Emilia..." Subaru cooed her name, as he brushed her silver bangs from her eyes. They were heavy, even though she slept soundly. No doubt she was wary from attempting the trial so much and without rest.

His eyes narrowed, as he noticed the glowing green crystal at the base of her neck was unusually dull and lifeless. There was a small crack at the tip of the crystal. Subaru went to touch it, as if to beckon the vaunted spirit from his sleep, but felt nothing when he made contact with the lifeless thing. There was no response—and if Puck was gone forever, surely, their situation was even worse than he could have imagined. Subaru was *almost* powerless compared to most of his adversaries, and now Emilia might have lost a good amount of her power and familial support as well.

"One day, even you can be like me, Subaru..."

Subaru stepped back slightly at the memory of Roswaal's dying decree. It rung in his head, beckoning him to give in to madness like that man had. He had gambled everything, even his life, on Subaru's power to redo. The memory of the Hare ripping him to pieces—eating him alive—was fresh in his mind. What utter madness had taken over that man—and that power he relied so heavily on had ceased to exist for reasons Subaru could not explain.

Finally, he could only say the few words...

"I can Return by Death!" Subaru declared, with no ill effects or consequence.

That sinister spirit, which resided within him against his own will—was seemingly gone without

explanation or cause. In his sheer madness, Subaru considered the possibility of suicide; to finally end it once and for all. His tiny, meaningless existence only had the importance it did because of the one power which gave him an advantage over anyone else, and now that was gone too. Of course, if he killed himself, he would not return like before.

No, this time he would be dead.

Feeling the dark thoughts of death welcoming him back into its loving embrace, he peered down at the sleeping angel before him.

Again, he remembered why he kept pushing himself to keep going in this evil world. He was doing it for *her*. It was a selfish reason. He wasn't doing it for himself, and he wasn't doing it for those whom he lost. *That* was only an excuse, he realized. He was solely doing it for her. She was his final link to this damnable world which had made him suffer like no other.

Subaru fell to his knees next to the motionless half-elf. He might have fallen a bit too close, because her eyes slowly lidded open, revealing her vibrant amethyst orbs. Pupils as of aquamarine narrowed somberly at the boy who knelt before her.

Without him noticing, Emilia carefully sat up, and reached out her hand to clasp his. "Are you well, Subaru?" she asked, his name rolling from her mouth like a gently flowing river. Meanwhile, she carefully fingered his lifeless hand with her own.

A chime from the sweetest bell broke him from his dismal trance. He looked up from the grassy knoll, and locked eyes with the exotic beauty which cascaded his every thought. Instantly, he felt his heart stop, and his throat began to swell, rendering him unable to speak. His eyes began to well up, and a lone tear escaped down his cheek.

Emilia intercepted it with a compassionate finger. "Subaru..." she whispered his name again, gently stroking his face. "Please... don't cry..."

Tears were now flowing freely from his stricken eyes. She cradled his head in her arms and led him down to her lap, where he found the peace none could give. In utter resignation, he collapsed into her, and all the emotions he had been holding in escaped freely with reckless abandon. He was almost wailing like a small child against her now. She could feel her skirt becoming damp from his sadness. In his despair, she brought her mouth within an inch of his ear and sung sweet nothings to him in her own desperate effort to calm him. She stroked his hair back and forth, drawing sweet circles on his convulsing back.

At her tender embrace, Subaru exposed himself in all his grief. The soft melody of her soothing voice threatened to lull him to sleep. He felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck, and a comforting warmth overtook him.

The deaths of his friends caused him such insurmountable grief—of her friends too, even if she didn't know it. He didn't know how to tell her. Maybe she already knew, maybe she could sense it emanating from his own anguish, from every cry which escaped his mouth. Even so, if she knew, he figured she would still be strong, so she could bring comfort to him. Any the case, he didn't care. He welcomed her soft and loving touch. He wanted to bury himself in her, to fall asleep and never wake up.

In her arms, his sleep would be without nightmares, without visions of death and destruction. It would be a fitful sleep with only the memory of her enchanting smile bringing the deepest warmth to his being, ever so stricken by the pain of loss. That was her power over him; that was her spell to which she had cast upon him.

While Subaru released the agony of the world upon her small frame, Emilia blinked, letting a little, single solitary tear of her own sneak by. It fell wistfully onto Subaru's hand as he desperately clung to her legs.

In an instant, Subaru's cries ceased, his convulsions coming to an unexpected end. He slowly withdrew his face from the comforting escape of her lap, and with a keen eye, looked up at the woman who held him. Her gorgeous amethyst eyes were sprinkled with small tear droplets, ready to fall at any moment. Even so, she held them dutifully, as Subaru's still fell solemnly.

Without warning, his hand cupped her cheek, and in another, his lips covered her own.

Clearly caught off guard, Emilia's eyes lidded shut and her breathing noticeably slowed. Her body had ceased all movement for the first few seconds of the kiss, as in her innocence, she really didn't know how to respond at all. Soon, she grew more comfortable with her newfound emotions, and embraced his loving gesture.

Beneath the lush canopy of ancient trees, the two lovers went largely unnoticed by the inhabitants of the forest. Squirrels nestled deeply in their warm burrows; birds fluttered throughout the air, playing their joyful games and singing their songs; the deer frolicked among themselves, enjoying the peaceful blue skies which graced them.

Through all of this, the two continued their elaborate dance, ignorant of all the sufferings and happenings of the world which surround them.

Subaru knelt forward, deepening his kiss, quickly becoming intoxicated with the sweet scent and taste of his partner whom he so loved dearly. Her glowing amethyst orbs were still speckled with tears, but still they did not fall. As he continued, she lidded her eyes shut as a small, pleasurable moan escaped her lips. Subaru didn't know specifically how long they had been locked together like this, but he wanted more... and *more*. As he breathed heavily through his nose, tickling Emilia with his desperate breath, she remained still, holding her own ever so diligently. Noticing this, Subaru ceased his wanton and unexpected romance to allow some air to enter her lungs.

Emilia panted hoarsely as she lay back against the base of the tree, her normally rose-colored cheeks now painted a bright shade of red. Recuperating her senses, she noticed Subaru continued to stare her down with a lustful gaze.

And stare he did. She looked nothing short of mesmerizing as she lay against that old wise tree, whose branches jutted out over them like ballerinas in step. Her glistening vibrant eyes reflected brightly in the sun, and her silver hair flowed gently in the wind. She was truly so otherworldly beautiful he couldn't find a competent way to describe her using only words. He himself was full of wild emotion, from pure sadness one moment to a bashful joy in another. The best way to describe his current self was pure uncontrollable mania.

Emilia, however, did not bore an expression of anger, or dismay, but of a serene innocence. She blinked inquisitively at Subaru, seemingly trying to read his mind, or see why he had come at her with such eager hunger as he did. She breathed short, quick heavy breaths as she stared him down, possibly somewhat disappointed he ended their dance so abruptly.

Observing this, he quickly crawled over to her and placed his hand on her own, interlacing their fingers together perfectly. He had never felt so much uncontrollable desire for anyone in his entire life, his intense yearning for her overcoming his normally pragmatic self. He pressed himself desperately against her petite frame, and his mouth orbited hungrily in the direction of her pale creamy neck.

Emilia, just recovering from his prior advances on her, did not expect another one, but it wasn't completely unwelcomed, nor was it unpleasant. She let out another sigh, which contained a mixture between excitement, pleasure, and confusion.

Simultaneously, Subaru began playfully kissing her neck, tenderly taking in every bit of her he could while lost in the heat of the moment. He absorbed her taste, her smell, and her touch, as every bit of her was so intoxicating he felt himself unable to stop. Her heat enraptured him, encasing him in a pleasurable ball of fire.

For her, his kiss excited her just as much, as it was unlike anything she had ever felt before. She didn't know why this was happening, but she couldn't bring herself to stop his playful advances, and so she gripped his hand harder, and pressed pleasingly into Subaru, her too, beginning to lose herself in the moment.

As he felt her press herself into him so receptively and unexpectedly, Subaru almost lost himself right then and there. Instantly, he found himself dancing from the cream of her neck, to the side of her jaw, to her ears, and back to her parted lips. It was a momentous feeling, and it felt nothing short of a small piece of heaven within this hellish world.

"Subhh—"

Emilia was barely able to partially mouth his name before he further explored her mouth.

His hand traveled to the nape of her neck to gently tip her head back, so he could maybe delve even deeper. Growing bolder, Subaru clearly had lost all semblance of thought into what he was currently doing.

Suddenly, one of the lone tears she held up until this point escaped quietly down her cheek.

As Subaru felt the heat of its touch, and its admittedly salty taste, it momentarily released him from the dreamscape of a world he had escaped to. His eyes widened at the shock of what he was doing. Shock began to replace itself with anger, anger replaced itself with grief, grief at himself for his reckless actions. As he stared into her tearful eyes, he cursed himself for his insolence in taking advantage of her fragile and susceptible state of mind.

Even still, she stared at him with the same innocence and purity she always did.

I'm despicable, he thought. Subaru didn't say the words aloud, but he wanted to.

She lay against the mossy tree breathlessly, splayed out and still, like a deer alert in the forest. Confused at why Subaru had ceased his actions, her pupils were dilated to an enormous size from the excitement which took over her every thought. Suddenly, her excitement began to subside as she noticed his aura was much different than it was just moments before. Now, his eyes were again dark and full of sadness and his perpetual grimace had returned to grace his heavy features.

Mistaking her confused innocence for displeasure, Subaru used it to further justify his vain futility. He quickly stood, and with heavy steps he turned and walked off, clearly beside himself. Noticing this, Emilia stood and with haste, gathered herself. She quickly followed him, and in a small gesture of reassurance, she took hold of his hand.

Subaru immediately froze, as if he was caught in a bear-trap.

"Subaru... why?" Emilia questioned him, her voice breaking with every word. "What is happening? Why did we leave everyone at the Sanctuary? Please tell me... Please! I don't understand what's happening—or why we are here!" It was a plea for the truth.

Darkness overtook him, and as she mouthed something else, it was all but lost to his ears. Subaru felt a cold chill overtake his body—a brutal, merciless snap back to the reality which beset them. It was as if all the hot blood in his body began to dissipate, and with it the warmth as well.

It was Emilia's nature to allow others to take precedent over herself. Subaru knew that, and yet even so he was still somewhat disappointed at her question. Amidst all the pain of remembrance from the night before, he still held his reverence of her over everyone else. He thought himself to be most disgusting thing in existence. Why did he always feel sorry for himself? Maybe he just wanted to be acknowledged by the last person alive who mattered to him; the only reason he still drew breath.

He flinched as he felt her hand squeeze his gently to awake him from his inner chastisement. Turning to face her, he locked eyes with her amethyst orbs yet again, exposing his inner turmoil to her. Accidentally letting his guard down, he noticed her face contort into one filled with both concern and understanding. She gripped both of his hands now, and he could tell she was silently begging him for an answer. He really couldn't hide his emotions from her. It wasn't possible. He had to tell her anyway, he couldn't hide it from her any longer.

Subaru narrowed his eyes at her, and his mouth went to speak, although there was a slight pause as a small gust of wind ruffled the feathers of the forest:

"They are all gone," he uttered silently, looking down as he did so. He wasn't man enough to look her in the eye as her heart broke. "They were taken by one of the three terrible demon beasts, known as the Great Hare. It's horrible, Emilia... Nobody has survived... Roswaal, Ram, Beatrice... Everyone at the Sanctuary is gone, and the mansion... Everyone was murdered at the mansion too."

He fell to his knees in defeat, still avoiding eye contact with Emilia. He hadn't heard a sound from her since he admitted the truth, as all he heard was the shallow breeze flowing through the trees, and the occasional chirp from the birds.

"I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry..." he cried, resigning himself to sorrow.

It was all he could do to keep from breaking down right here and now in front of her. He had to be stronger, he had to—

A soft hand cupped his cheek, breaking his thought.

"Oh, *my* lovely Subaru," Emilia had said in the gentlest way possible. It was almost eerie how calming her voice was, as if nothing had happened at all. She gazed at him as he slowly looked up at her face. "You've been through so much, haven't you?"

The softness of her lullaby contrasted heavily with the bleak thoughts which plagued Subaru's mind. "Emilia..." he whispered, a tangible pain laced in every syllable. His voice faltered, his body shook, and his face contorted in anguish—Subaru finally broke. "Why... is it so terrible? Why? Rem... Ram... Everyone... why? Emilia..."

By now he had latched onto her for dear life, like he was about to lose her forever. He gripped hard enough he maybe would never let go. He surely didn't intend to. Tumultuous emotions blanketed his fragile mind. Indeed, he was the weak one.

"I know," she breathed soothingly into his ear while she rocked him like a toddler. "Please... listen to my voice, Subaru."

It was then Emilia realized, as she gazed down her broken Subaru, that she had to be strong for him—for now, she was his strength, as he was hers. A tear or two escaped her glistening eyes as well, silently mourning her own losses. But for now, she had to comfort the one who felt their deaths rested on his shoulders and his alone. The weight was unbearable to hold alone. Because of this, they would bear such a burden together.

As he lay there in her lap, attentive to her sweet voice, she began to weave him a beautiful song softly into his ear. He couldn't quite understand her, as she seemingly sung it to him in a different language, but it was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard. It must have been the language of the angels, as its sophistication and elegance were unmatched. The purity and serenity of her voice captivated him, enchanting him under a mystical spell, and he began to lose himself in sweet surrender. Her voice was like the sound of the crystal-clear ocean, flowing endlessly until the end of time, or the singing voice of a songbird, flying freely through a mountain pass over an ancient azure river.

Fumbling to find the words to describe such a pure sound, Subaru tucked himself into her, and his eyes slowly began to close shut. For once, he felt some measure of peace. As he resigned himself to lay in the angel's arms, she continued to sing her song to him long after he passed into the oblivion of sleep. His eyes were dried, and his breath was even now, no longer chaotic and full of agony.

She stroked his forehead with every bit of love and tender care she could conjure. She wanted to comfort him, be there for him, as he had been there for her. He had done so much for her, even if it came to the disastrous conclusion it did. He sacrificed himself for her—his purity and innocence. He was scarred now, she knew. It was all she could do to be there for him in his darkest hour.

"Sleep, *my knight*..." she whispered, weaving every syllable into his ear with meticulous care. Soon, she found herself nodding off as well, lost in the peaceful moment for which they shared.

Maybe her claim for the throne had ended, maybe her journey to free her people was all but folly. It didn't matter anymore. The only thing which mattered to her now was this boy in her arms who had given her everything he had, and so, she would return the favor in the best way she could.

Her eyes lidded, once, twice, her grip on his hand loosening ever so slightly, even as his remained steadfast.

In a moment's time, beneath the brush of the luscious trees, Emilia fell fast asleep, in the arms of her hero.

If anyone dared to pass by a long and winding road southeast of Priestella, none would notice the two nestled beneath a wise tree just off the path. Only the wildlife of the forest came to see whom their new visitors were, curious to see who had intruded upon their territory. But even they refused to disturb the two and their sacred rest.

Subaru's sleep, while calm and peaceful, was full of thought. In the dark depths of his mind, he pondered to himself a future with Emilia and Emilia alone. Was he selfish for that? Was he selfish to want to find a peace in this world, when so many had suffered and died for nothing? He didn't quite understand or immediately find an answer to his questions, but even so, in the deep underworld of his subconscious—he dreamed of love.

Amongst that wonderful dream of love, he heard a distant, but soothingly familiar voice...

*I know which is my fate
Bond to Erian's old tale
I'll be always there*

Fighting the ancient sin
Moon shine in this eternal night

Part One - The Wish and the Wood

*Angels are calling
From divine lost crystal realms
Riding from heaven
For the magic of the wizard's dream*

Subaru felt the tickle of small rain droplets against his skin. He blinked his eyes open, struggling to banish the sleep from his mind. Finally coming to, he carefully observed his surroundings.

It didn't take long for him to notice the beautiful blue skies had been replaced by a bleak, smoldering grey one. The sound of birds singing in the air, too, had vanished. Now, the happy sounds of toads excited by their newfound puddles had replaced them in large number. Eddies of rain began to fall from the trees from above; however, the large canopy which surrounded them provided ample shelter to keep them from the worst of the downpour.

Gathering his wits about him, Subaru sat up and shook Emilia gently. Her long dark lashes fluttered, and her eyes peeked open, revealing her gentle amethyst orbs.

Smiling softly at her, the first real genuine smile he had in ages, Subaru shrugged. "Ah, look at this weather," he quipped nonchalantly, as if she hadn't realized they were being rained on. "Shouldn't we get to someplace warm, Emilia?"

Returning his smile with one of her own, Emilia nodded politely in agreement. "Of course, Subaru," she said, raising a delicate hand to him. "Will you help me up, please?"

Subaru nodded politely, then he gently took her hand and stood her up with minor assistance. Brushing off her skirt, Emilia noticed her apparent condition; she wouldn't mind a shower and a change of clothes as well.

Emilia pointed toward the west and said, "If we take this road a little further, we will come to the crossroads amidst the capital and Priestella. Maybe we should go to Priestella?" It was just a thought.

"Priestella, huh?" Subaru turned his head slightly in a wondering manner. "Isn't that the port city between Kararagi, Gusteko, and the Vollachia Empire?" Maybe they could run away from Lugnica, far away from the troubles which plagued them?

"Yes, it is, Subaru," Emilia said while gesturing affirmatively. She appeared to be nervous, as if she was unsure on what she was about to say. "I wish to get away from here. Now that Roswaal is gone, my sponsorship for the throne has gone with him. I don't have a reason to be here any longer... and to be honest with myself, if I was alone, I would just return to where I belong..." She looked at the ground between her two feet and paused before continuing, "Before I met Roswaal, I lived alone in Elier Forest to the north of here. But now that I have you, Subaru, we can go anywhere!"

Once more, the two made eye contact, exposing her spirited lavender eyes in all their splendor. Just one look at them, and it was all Subaru could do to keep his heart from bursting right then and there.

Slowly, she reached her hand out to Subaru. "Will y-you take me away from here?" she asked, stuttering and revealing her unsurety.

Stunned, Subaru looked at her with slight apprehension. Was this Emilia he was speaking to, or was it the Emilia whose mind was made so fragile by Roswaal's machinations and deception? He couldn't tell for sure, but regardless, he would do her best to protect her in any way he could.

In an instant, he decided what he would do.

Emilia's hand was claimed by another, and she looked up at him with vibrant, emotional eyes. "Subaru..." she said with a pause, her voice barely above a whisper. "You will support me?"

He nodded and gave her an assured smile. "Of course, Emilia. I will always be there for you. I made a promise, and I don't intend to break that promise."

It was the last promise he had left—to save her. All the other promises he made had been broken—both to others and to himself. However, he could do nothing about it now. He had to pick up what he had and move on. This was the one promise the rest of them were built upon.

"Thank you, Subaru..." she whispered shyly, giving him her best bright smile he so adored.

Subaru nodded, returning her smile with his own. "Let's get out of this rain, Emilia."

In her bashfulness, her free hand rose to cover her mouth, and a warm, rosy color tinted her cheeks. "Thank you for being there for me," she said finally.

With her hand in his, Subaru decided to take her far away from here, away from all the troubles of the world. "And now we shall go to Priestella," he said resolutely, looking forward with his gaze reaching deep into the forest in front of them.

She looked wondrously up at him, and he turned once more and met eyes with her. Emilia smiled softly at him, and with a step, they began their journey.

There were many winding paths and intricate roads which led them to their destination, though not all were the safest. Some were infested with beasts of all kinds, and others with bandits ready to pilfer anything a passing traveler had.

It was because of this Emilia and Subaru had to tread more than carefully.

With limited supplies, they needed a way to find food and shelter, *fast*. They would avoid the road to the Mathers mansion, as Subaru knew what dangers awaited them there, regardless if Roswaal was dead or not. They would be wise to avoid the main road in general. So, Subaru chose to take the road less travelled, to escape attention the unusual pair would bring.

Nobody sung high songs for halves in this area, and with her likeness to the *Jealous Witch*, Satella, Emilia would most likely spend most of her public appearances concealed under the safety net of her magical cloak.

Subaru didn't mind at all; in fact, the last thing he wanted was to bring attention to themselves. He wanted to disappear with Emilia, never to be seen again. That was the only way they were going to live any sort of long and prosperous life together, as such a high number of evil agents clearly sought out Emilia for reasons he did not fully understand.

Between the path leading toward Irlam Village and the Flugel Crossroads, the pair found a long-abandoned road, whose crooked path looped in and out like a snake.

By now, the weather had long since deteriorated into a murky bog of a storm. It meant the pair met very few travelers on the roads, as all the sensible merchants and vagabonds were nestled comfily

in warm shelter. The surrounding forests were shrouded in a misty fog as thick as the sheets of ice they traversed just the night before.

"Ah... if only we had a dragon carriage!" Subaru exclaimed to no one in particular, causing Emilia to chuckle quietly to herself behind him.

He really missed Patrasche. Hopefully that loyal girl made it out of the massacre by the Hare. His memory briefly took him back to when he found the loyal beast trapped in the stables at the Mathers mansion. He had ridden her back to the Sanctuary before letting her go, as she could not traverse the frozen hell created by Roswaal.

He remembered the haunting memories of Petra and Frederica, the violence of their deaths, and the despair it brought. He shook his head to release them from his thoughts.

"Maybe we can barter a ride with someone?" Emilia added innocently, thankfully breaking him from his momentary return to grief. "There's always someone willing to pick up a gir—"

"No, no, no!" Subaru interrupted her in a gesture of disagreement. "We should avoid contact with anyone for now. I don't want anyone to know where we are or who we are. It's safest for us that way."

Emilia nodded quickly in agreement. "Certainly!" she said.

Now that she thought about it, it would be extremely important to conceal her identity to everyone but Subaru. Cautiously, she adjusted the hood she wore back over her long pointy ears, hiding them from view.

Feeling his stomach growl profusely, Subaru grimaced. He hadn't eaten for what felt like days now. He was certain Emilia hadn't eaten either, as she had locked herself away for days at a time in the tomb, endlessly attempting the trial until she could do no more.

He looked back at her, watching her keep pace quietly behind him. She seemed to be at ease, and she clearly wasn't in any more distress than he was.

She truly was amazing. Her strength seemed to grow as his began to fade. It was like a natural balance they shared, an ability to pick each other up and hold one another through the most desperate of times. He was just worried about the fragility of her mind. He still remembered her confession of love to him in the tomb, real or unreal as it was. Even though she appeared strong, her mind was in a delicate state during that time, so he kept it as a memory locked away in the back of his head rather than at the forefront of his thoughts. He wouldn't prod her about it; instead, he would let her fragile state of mind heal, as he would let his own do the same. Both Emilia and himself needed time to mend themselves. Time healed all wounds, thankfully.

"Look!" Subaru was jolted from his deep thought by Emilia shouting excitedly. "Through the trees, there's smoke over there in a clearing—it could be Nicia."

"Nicia... is that a village?" Subaru questioned her, as he peered over the forest. He cupped his hands, as if he were staring through an eyeglass. Through the damp foliage and moderate trickle of rain, he could see a light hazy smoke through the clearing. The fog appeared to end as well—no doubt there was something over there.

"Tis a small village betwixt Priestella and Ladrimea," she simply explained to him. "We can find food and shelter there and wait for the storm to pass. Should we make a stop there?"

Subaru rubbed his ravenous belly. "I think so," he said, an aching pain from hunger infusing his

voice. "It should be small enough to avoid a lot of attention from outsiders, but big enough to get lost in. Besides, we really need to get something to eat."

Truthfully, he would prefer to make the trek straight to Priestella. The city was large enough for anyone looking to lay low to lose themselves in. They weren't criminals on the lam by any means, but they wanted to act like such. Avoiding unwanted attention was extremely important right now, especially when word of Roswaal L. Mathers' death got out. Come to think of it, he didn't give it much thought before, but some will become suspicious about Roswaal's death. Some might even blame Emilia for the demise he created for himself. He wouldn't let her shoulder the blame for that bastard's evil machinations.

Pushing such thoughts to the side, Subaru took her hand and the two began to pace themselves a little faster than before now they were close to civilization.

He couldn't wait to get a warm cozy bed by the fire and a hot meal. If he could just sleep for more than a few hours at a time, his mood would improve dramatically. No doubt Emilia needed rest as well. She was probably more stressed than he was—from the trial, the deaths of her friends, and the loss of Puck. He didn't even want to know what she was really feeling. All he knew is he would do his best to support her as she supported him.

The two crossed a small wooden bridge which hung over a shallow creek. Becoming more and more anxious as they approached the village, Subaru felt himself starving. He was thirsty too. Their provisions were nonexistent, and they had been travelling for almost a day without anything to fuel their tired bodies. Finding himself unable to last any longer, Subaru ran down to the stream, and he fell almost headfirst into the water. Hungrily, he drank from the fresh water, cupping it in his hands and bringing it eagerly to his mouth.

Oh god, he thought. He didn't realize how thirsty he really was.

Likewise, Emilia knelt beside him, and she enjoyed some of the pure stream herself.

It was a peaceful moment shared between the two. The sounds of the gentle raindrops coupled with the rhythmic flowing of the river was soothing indeed, even if Subaru found himself almost shivering from being damp so long. He was just glad to be at peace with Emilia for now, and finally soon they would have some ample rest.

"Not bad, huh?" Subaru remarked cutely to her as he continued to drink from the river.

"It *reeeally* is good," Emilia replied happily, stretching out her words in pure pleasure. "I was *sooo* thirsty!"

They both shared a good laugh between themselves, and soon enough they continued on their way. The village was close, not even a half mile's way down the dirt road. After all the walking they had done, it felt like no time before they passed through the entrance of the settlement, and they found themselves at a broad wooden gate.

At their arrival, a rotten wooden panel slid open, revealing a cloaked figure who eyed them down with peculiar curiosity.

"Who goes there?" he questioned the pair cautiously. "What brings you two to Nicia? We want no troubles' here."

"Our business is ours alone," Subaru said, his voice defiant. "We've just come to seek a little bit of warmth and shelter. We would be infinitely generous of your hospitality if you would allow us. We

won't stay a days' time, and then we'll be on our way." He gestured to his partner who appeared to be a normal girl.

The man nodded in understanding, and he unlocked the gate.

Cracking the door open, he eyed the pair carefully and said, "A boy and a girl all the ways' out here with no supplies? Oh, well, okay then. You can't be too careful these days; there's been word of bandit and demon beast attacks all over Lugnica! Terrible times, these are."

Subaru nodded in understanding of the guard's worry, and they followed their safe passage into the village.

The village itself was rather impressive for one as remote as it was. It wasn't on the direct road to Priestella, but quite a bit out of the way. It wasn't an ideal trade route per se, but clearly, the village was functioning at a high capacity, as the buildings all appeared in decent shape.

Obviously, due to the inclement weather, travel was short in the village. He numbered a great deal of shops and stores to choose from, but he had his eye on the inn which resided across from the gateway into the village.

Its nameplate read, *The Dancing Dragon*. The artwork on it showed a ground-dragon in a dance with a mug of mead in its hand. *Aptly named*, he thought.

As the pair entered the inn, they were met with a merry sight of men and demi-human alike, all sharing in drink and festivity. The inn was dark and dreary, and it held travelers from all walks of life in its halls. It was like something straight out of a fantasy book Subaru used to read when he was a kid. Staring in wide wonder, he shot Emilia a smirk, and she smiled softly back at him.

As they approached the bartender, he stared at them with one wide eye—the other had apparently long since been gouged out.

"Well, would you look at what we have here!" he exclaimed, his voice both booming and bombastic. "What brings you youngins out here to Nicia?"

"We're just staying for one night," Subaru claimed, placing three blessed gold coins on the table. "Would you mind if you gave us a warm room, and a hot meal?"

Taking the blessed gold pieces in his hand, the bartender smiled greedily to himself. "Well, we might have been completely booked before, but I think I can accommodate you!" He turned around and grabbed two wooden bowls for the pair... and two mugs.

Subaru watched him curiously as he scooped out two nice-sized bowls of soup for them. Emilia smiled brightly to him, clearly starving. The bartender also filled the two half-pint mugs full of mead.

"Here you two are!" the barman said, revealing to them their dinner—spoons, mugs, bowls and all. "Last door down the hallway, on the right."

Taking the door key from the bartender's massive stubby hand, Subaru gave him his thanks, and the two made their way through the bustling inn all the way to their room.

Sliding the key in and turning it deftly, Subaru opened the door, revealing a nice little comfy room complete with one bed, a desk, a lantern, a nice view of the village through the window and a lounging area. The bathroom really wasn't all that impressive, though, but it would have to suffice.

He turned to Emilia, noticing her struggling to carry the two mugs of mead and the bowls of soup. A laugh escaped him, and judging by her expression, she did not enjoy it at all.

"Here, let me get those for you," he said, taking his mug and bowl from her. A moment longer and she probably would have dropped it all. "Okay! Let's eat!"

Emilia nodded happily to her partner, and the two dug into their meals with absolute lust. Forgetting his table manners, Subaru slurped down the soup and chugged the mead as if it were the last meal he was ever going to have. Laughing at the sight before him, Emilia sipped some mead from her mug as well, enjoying the pungent burn of alcohol as it trickled down her throat.

"*Mhmm...*" she hummed, letting out a pleasurable groan of contentment. While not an alcoholic by any means, she really did enjoy a good drink, especially after all the events which occurred. All her stresses and worries slowly melted away with every sip.

Subaru, however, had not enjoyed his meal at all, devouring it all just as he had got it. The mead was surprisingly stronger than he had expected, because he began to feel a little lightheaded. Of course, back home in the human world, he would have never thought to drink alcohol. But here, alone with Emilia and in another world, he could make exceptions.

"It's *sooo* good," Emilia said to him, drawing out her words in pure pleasure. She tilted her head and stared inquisitively at her partner across the table. "Subaru, are you well?" She looked at him funnily... as if something might have been wrong with his face.

His cheeks had turned bright red like he was nervous for whatever reason, and his face was sort of... blank. Maybe he was allergic to alcohol?

Emilia grabbed his hand and squeezed him slightly to get his attention. "Hey, do you like to drink?" she asked, as she gazed into his ever fading eyes. "You drank that *sooo* fast! I thought you didn't enjoy alcohol like that, Subaru."

It seemingly took him a few seconds to realize she was staring at him dead in the eye. He gave her his best wiry smile and a curious thumbs up. Wordlessly, he stood up and plopped unceremoniously on the bed, obviously unconscious. The culmination of alcohol, exhaustion, and the warm environment took its toll on him.

Emilia chuckled quietly to herself, covering her mouth to stifle an even louder laughter. *Subaru really was something special*, she thought.

Getting up, she picked up the used dishes and began to scrub them clean in the sink. After that was done, she removed her damp cloak, shirt and dress and hung them near the window to dry.

Shivering slightly, she felt relief as her skin finally began to dry. Worryingly, she noticed Subaru had not taken his clothes off, which were still soaking wet from the rain outside. If he slept like that, surely, he would catch a cold. Sighing gently, she stepped quietly over to his motionless body and, very carefully, began to remove his shirt. As she pulled the shirt off, it revealed his naked body to her, painting her cheeks red at the sight of it.

Her innocence might have been too much for her to handle sometimes. Luckily enough, he did not stir one bit as she had done so.

After hanging his shirt on the wall as well, she too tucked herself into bed, savoring the warmth which overtook her body. It was a nice, warm feather bed which was actually very comfortable for the price they paid. Pulling the sheets back, she tucked Subaru in, who still lay unconscious on his

stomach. His mouth hung open just slightly, and his breath was even and smooth.

She had never slept in such proximity to someone like this in the long years of her life. Her heart pounded heavily in her chest, exhilarated to be this close to Subaru. She was so close she could feel the warmth of his body roll off onto her own, encasing her in his presence.

Pulling the warm sheets over herself, she too began to feel the effects of exhaustion overtake her.

Not a few moments later, in the warm embrace of each other, Subaru and Emilia slept peacefully next to one another, the rain still falling gently outside.

Unbeknownst to Emilia, the emerald green crystal at the base of her chest pulsed, full of life.

Hopefully, this peace would last, Puck mused pensively to himself.

And peace it was as the two slept a dreamless sleep in the loving confines of one another. Yet, even if it was wished for, such a peace could never last. As time passed unknowingly through the calm oblivion of sleep, Subaru's mind began to stir, and it wouldn't be long until he found himself aroused.

Something hammered his skull, pulling him violently from the grips of sleep. Looking around, the room had a low dim light to it, as the sun had not yet fully crept out of its own rest for the day. Because of this, everything was blanketed in a genial low shadow. Outside, the village was quiet, except for the atmospheric sounds of cicadas and the occasional morning bird's song.

With a groan, Subaru rolled onto his side and rubbed his temple in a vain attempt to nurse his assailing headache. In doing so, he felt something both immeasurably soft and unbearably warm press against his body. Gently, slowly, and with great caution, he pulled the sheets back.

If his vision wasn't already swimming with haze and delirium before, it was now.

Snuggled comfily against his body was Emilia, her mouth slightly agape and her breath evenly paced, signifying she was still fast asleep. Subaru narrowed his eyes at his innocent sleeping partner who shared such intimacy with himself.

Wait, was she naked?! he thought. His face heated up from the mere notion of it. While recoiling away, he haphazardly covered her with the blanket and crawled backward so fast he almost fell completely off the bed. Cut off from Emilia's heat, he felt a cold draft banish his own warmth, almost causing him to shiver... before he realized his shirt was missing too. His face became red from ear to ear.

By now, Emilia had awoken from the commotion, and she peeked out slowly from underneath the blankets, covering her bare chest from Subaru's view. Her amethyst eyes blinked sleepily at him, silently questioning his antics.

Even though Subaru couldn't see anything memorable in the darkness, his imagination did most of the work for him. "Em-mi-mi-lia!" he sputtered hopelessly, struggling to find the words. "Why are you like that?" His mouth was almost agape as he stared shyly at her.

Emilia just continued to look at him inquisitively from beneath the haven of her sheets, with only her collarbone and above visible to him. She smiled mischievously to herself, and it was just enough to get his imagination running wild. She decided she would have a little bit of fun with him, if only just to tease him a little bit.

"Oh, this?" Emilia asked coyly, while pulling the sheets up a little further to cover her nudity. "You

don't want to sleep with me, Subaru?"

As she looked up at him with her large, doll-like eyes, he almost felt himself melt from sheer terror, or panic, or hysteria... or whatever this deep pounding feeling which was shaking every ounce of his body to its core.

Innocently, she slowly laid her head back down on the pillow, nestling herself deep within the warm confines of the blankets. She never broke eye contact with him, nor did he to her. She just lay there, silently taunting him with her otherworldly beauty and presence.

Her question was rhetorical. She knew he *wanted* her. She knew everything about him. He had confessed his love for her many times over, and even she once to him. But did she really understand love, and what it meant? Did she remember that time in the tomb, when in her fragility, she tried to give herself to him? He had denied her—abandoned her, even—although he found himself crawling back to her when the world came crumbling down, desperate for the warmth of her love. In the end, when everything was gone, he wanted to bury himself into its oblivion and hold on to it and never let go.

Gathering himself, he noticed his shirt hanging by the window. He stood, and in a swift action, put his shirt on. Emilia eyed him carefully from the bed, wondering what his response would be. But he turned to her and said nothing, surprising her with his silence. The Subaru before her was different than the one just moments ago. The him just seconds ago was nervous, and unsure of himself. This one appeared to be determined, able, and full of charisma. His hardened expression alone showed that was the case.

He sat on the bed next to Emilia, wanting to speak. But he paused momentarily, thinking carefully about what he was about to say. His expression softened, and he let a gentle smile through his façade.

"Emilia..." he slowly uttered her name, pausing briefly before continuing. "...I have made my love for you very clear by now, haven't I?" It wasn't a question per se, just a reminder of his loyalty to her, in case she had forgotten.

The melted candle on the side of the bed had long since burned out. There was a heady smell of scented, drifting smoke which filled the air. For too long did the pair sit next to one another before another voice broke the unwanted silence.

Emilia was suddenly filled with a terrible sadness which made it difficult for her to speak.

"Subaru... I didn't mean for it to come across that way," she said, her voice weak and unsure.

Emilia didn't expect to get a response like that, especially not here and now. Forgetting herself, she reached with great care and touched his hand, but still he remained motionless. "Please, I'm sorry... I didn't mean that, Subaru."

She still lay beneath the blankets as she fingered at his hand. He remained motionless as she lovingly touched him. It was a small thing, one little solitary touch, but it was meaningful.

She didn't understand why she struggled so deeply in verbally expressing her feelings to him. She could feel them vibrate within her, the strong feelings pulsating in her chest. It made it difficult to breathe sometimes. It was a foreign feeling, to love him like he loved her. Maybe, because it was so foreign, that rendered it so difficult to express in words. No simple 'I love you' would suffice—it wouldn't be nearly as meaningful. No, her love for him was more than that. He was more than that to her. She would never forget his love for her, and even though she struggled to express her love for him in words, she could certainly show him with action. Oh, the heat of it all. It was intoxicating. And still, he was still cold, so utterly cold.

Grasping his shirt, she pulled him down to her. It caught him off guard, because she was able to drag him under the sheets with little resistance. She had snaked her hand around the nape of his neck and to the back of his head, caressing him against her body. He lay still like a possum playing dead in her arms. It probably had something to do with her bare body being pressed so suddenly against him. She didn't mind however, even if she was just a little on the prudish side. This was a moment which had to be shared between the two. It was purely innocent, blissful love. Nothing more, nothing less.

As he felt her hand draw loving circles on his back, he snapped back to reality. He could feel her hot breath tickle him, as she had buried her face in the nape of his neck. His immediate shock turned to understanding, and he returned the embrace, wrapping his arms around her in a reciprocal gesture. Her warmth was his obsession. As her soft supple chest was pressed against his own, he suddenly wished he hadn't put his shirt back on. He wanted to feel her against him, feel the softness and warmth of skin-on-skin contact. Not even a few seconds of their embrace had passed, and already he could feel nothing but the sensation of her enveloping heat. It was, simply put, unmistakably heavenly.

Subaru pressed himself deeper into her, wanting more, and she in return held him tighter. She could feel his want. His emotional attachment to her was unbearably strong. Maybe she could take it one step further, for now. In the darkness, they couldn't see each other well, but they could certainly feel every inch of their bodies.

Removing her hand from the small of his back, she wound her way across his waist and to the hem of his shirt. In one smooth motion, she pulled it over his head, removing it. He didn't even have a second to object—not that he wanted to.

"Oh, god..." Subaru breathlessly whispered into her pointy ear as she pressed her hot body against him. He probably didn't mean to say that out loud, but he did anyway.

His unabashed reaction made Emilia smile haughtily to herself. It humored her at the fact she could send him into such excitement without much effort on her part. It gave her inner peace to make him feel pleasant.

And what a bliss it was. Subaru was there. Sweet bliss, bliss and serenity. She was heaven made flesh, he realized to himself. He knew it before, her angelic beauty seemed almost otherworldly. But now he was sure.

Maybe all half-elves were this enchanting, he thought. He remembered the first time he laid eyes on her—just one look, and he had fallen under her mystical spell. Her allure was so strong he found himself orbiting toward her without even realizing it, stepping closer to her without thinking about it. His feelings grew substantially for her without any real rhyme or reason. As much of a bad taste as it was, she had bewitched him, without him ever realizing it until now.

"Touch me, Subaru..." Emilia ordered, her voice hot and sultry.

Those words processed slowly into one ear and out the other. Her velveteen seduction was too much for him to handle, and only one word found itself a suitable response to her plea:

"Fuck..."

Giving into her mesmerizing temptation, his hands toured her back, winding up, down and around, exploring new territories freely as if they had a mind of their own.

Even if he couldn't see her, he was absorbing every soft contour of her body. He was tasting her

without ever taking a bite, he was drinking her without ever sipping from that forbidden cup. Oh, God, how he wanted to do all those things. Her skin was softer than the smoothest silk, and her smell was something else entirely. She smelt faintly of a rich jasmine, which he enjoyed with each deep breath he took. He wished he could just lay there wrapped up with her for the rest of his life. He embedded his face lovingly into her rich, silver hair. What a beautiful majestic color it was, so unique and so amazingly brilliant. He could rest there for hours, if he so pleased.

This Emilia, there was something different about her. She felt surer of herself, surer of her love for him. Previously, she hadn't quite understood her feelings for him. But now, it seemed she had given into the desire which clashed like lightning between the two before.

Her demonstrating her love for him—it just made him want her even more. She was the sweetest of the forbidden fruit. Once he took one bite, it took every ounce of his will to stop.

...and perhaps even that wouldn't be enough in the end.

By this time, Emilia was flushed beyond recognition. Her normally pink-hued cheeks, which graced her alabaster skin, swelled to a deep blood-red color. She tried to keep her composure for Subaru, but it was becoming exceedingly difficult the more he explored her body with the lust and need he was demonstrating. His touch was gentle, but clearly, he wanted *more*. She could feel him knead her softly wherever his hands found rest. Her back, her stomach, her side... and even occasionally her soft, tantalizing legs, giving them a gentle, loving squeeze as well. Only her chest seemed to be off-limits to him.

She recognized the fealty of the unspoken limit he had set upon himself and their new budding relationship. His nobility made her smile as he made her feel loved and wanted. It was reflective of both their professional and personal relationship—one between lord and knight, and between a man and a woman. Much like he would never go against her favor, he would never force himself upon her, or allow himself to take advantage of her. She didn't know where this newfound love would take the two, but she was enjoying every second of it.

When had I fallen so hard for him? she thought. It was something she didn't quite understand fully. One moment, she was so unsure of his love for her, and the next, she understood so completely there was no doubt in her mind her feelings for him. He had tried so hard to prove himself, to prove his words were meaningful to her. He continuously sacrificed himself for her, and her plight they once shared together. Maybe it was that solemn night in the tomb when he came to rescue her? She realized even though he had lost everything, he continued to exist for her sake. He continued to live, just for her. His love for her was so strong, so unshaken by devastation, that even at the end of the world, he still tried to salvage what he could, and to make her happy.

That was her Subaru. That was who he was to her. He was her savior, her rescuer, her beacon in the darkness, leading her through the shadow which haunted her at every turn. He was her knight.

It was the truth. He held no malice toward her, only the will to defend her, to protect her, and to serve her. His love for her was only pure, she realized, and so her own love for him revealed itself. What was once locked away tight in the corners of her mind, now shone itself brightly and with radiance. It was a quiet thing, to fall in love. She hadn't even realized it was happening.

The early morning had been growing long, with the sun just about ready to peek over the horizon, bringing light to the dark and dreary night.

Subaru and Emilia remained comfortably in their embrace, savoring the closeness of one another. They hadn't explored any further than necessary, unwilling to damage their newfound love for each other with unwelcomed and unbecoming advances. Instead, they shared their innocent love

together throughout the early morning, silently comforting one another once again. Neither Subaru nor Emilia dared to fall asleep, as if they did, it would have surely been a waste of such a moment shared so personally between the two. So, they lay wide awake, keen to their heightened senses, absorbing one another almost entirely.

Subaru lay there on his side, his soft hazel brown eyes locked with her passionate, sparkling amethyst orbs. His hand rested lovingly on her cheek, stroking her ever so gently. His other hand had found its way down to her creamy long legs, and he had scooped one of them up to rest it over his body. By now, his hangover resulting from the night before had long since dissipated. Instead, he felt nothing but peace and happiness.

Her hands just rested plainly on his chest, feeling the slow up and down rhythm of his peaceful breathing. The rhythmic breathing of his heart soothed her soul, making her feel completely at ease with the world. *Love certainly was something else*, she mused silently.

There had been no verbal conversation between them for some time, as they just enjoyed the peaceful quiet of their company. Subaru had made it clear on his part he was enjoying the moment. Their passionate foreplay had long since ceased, but it led to nothing more than that. Now, he just wanted to bask in her presence before the start of the day.

As if on cue, small rays of golden light broke through the window of their room.

It had to be just coincidence, but Emilia's pale snow-like skin, moon-silver hair and bright purple eyes reflected the sun rays so perfectly; it gave her such an angelic complexion that Subaru just couldn't understand how such a person could exist. For the first time this morning, he had a clear view of the captivating half-elf who lay so passionately in his arms. She was even more beautiful than he could ever imagine in his mind.

She eyed him with her big vibrant orbs, which were lidded ever so slightly. Her expression had a playful tone to it, her mouth almost a smirk. She was quite simply, highly amused at his incessant gawking.

"Why, is there something wrong, Subaru?" she said, teasing him openly. He appeared dumbfounded at her playful advance. "You don't look so well..."

Subaru playfully squeezed her cheek and sat up off the bed, covering her nude body respectfully with the blanket. He took her dried clothes off the wall and handed them to her. She nodded and received them without question. He didn't want her to feel uncomfortable in the nude.

"Thank you..." Emilia replied, her voice even and respectful.

Turning away from her, he let out a boorish yawn while acknowledging her gratitude, and he threw his shirt haphazardly over his head, pulling it over his shoulders in one quick motion.

"I'm going to draw up a bath," she decided, taking her clothes and covering herself. She tip-toed quietly over to the bathroom. "I won't be too long, I promise."

He nodded away from her as she closed the bathroom door behind her. Surely enough, it had been some time since they had been able to wash themselves. She was no doubt craving a nice bath. He would take one later; for now, he had to figure out a few things.

One was the newfound relationship he had formed with the beautiful half-elf who bathed so innocently in the bathroom next to him. How on earth he managed to swing that, he would never know. All he knew was this week had been one of completely tumultuous emotion: of depression,

sadness, happiness, and pure bliss. It was, quite simply put, *insane*.

He could hear said half-elf singing happily in the bathroom as she enjoyed herself. She no doubt was experiencing the same ill-begotten and wonderful emotions as he was, although she seemed to be taking it better than he was. He smiled at the beauty of her voice. While she wasn't necessarily the best singer, he could still listen to her sweet sound forever. He adored her *that* much.

Truthfully, he hadn't forgotten all those who were lost, and he still silently mourned them as he would until the end of his days. But if he didn't move on, he would no doubt lose his mind. So, because of this, he kept them tucked deeply within the confines of his heart, and Emilia at the front. It would be the only real way he could continue living like this, as selfish as that was.

Secondly, money. Real world problems came back to haunt him in this new world he found himself locked in.

From the pouch of his pants, Subaru withdrew a small sack of coins. Dumping them on the table, he grimaced as he looked at them. "One... Three... Seven... Twelve..." he counted with mock enthusiasm, dropping each blessed gold coin unceremoniously back into the pouch. "Twelve blessed gold coins, not nearly enough for what we need to do." He was clearly disappointed at their reserves.

They needed a lot more gold than that if they were going to make it all the way to Priestella. Even more so, the amount to charter a ship away from Lugnica would no doubt cost them a small fortune. What could they do to make some more gold? It was a predicament, that's for sure. He didn't want to put himself in any more harm's way than he should, being he now had to treat life as one normally would... although there was good money in mercenary work. They had more skill and fighting power than the regular passerby, but still, he did not know where to look for such work.

He tossed the unpleasantly empty coin pouch on the table and turned to Emilia who was just exiting the bathroom, obviously finished with her short bath. Hot steam poured from the bathroom—he wouldn't pry on how she managed to heat the bath right now. She stood in front of him, drying her hair with a towel. She wore her typical outfit, adorned with her signature small flower clip in her hair, and the small green emerald, supposedly containing Puck—hung at the base of her collarbone.

"You look so beautiful, Emilia," he complimented her simply. Sometimes her beauty captivated him so much, he couldn't really find the words to express it.

Emilia smiled at him, clearly happy with herself. "Thank you," she replied shyly, the pink hue of her cheeks flaring slightly at his base compliment.

He walked over to her, took her hand in his, and said, "Ready to continue our journey to Priestella?"

"Yes, let us go."

Emilia gave him her best bright smile once more, and after taking the coin pouch from the table, the two walked out the door to their room.

The tavern was still all but asleep, as only a few souls were out and about in the main hall—some already enjoying a nice drink, no less. The bartender was fast at work, cleaning mugs and dishes in preparation for the day. Subaru waved his thanks to him once again, and the bartender raised an empty mug to him in silent acknowledgement.

As the two exited The Dancing Dragon, they were graced with a hazy morning which still bore the glistening remnants of morning dew all across the village grass. It was a quiet morning, with very few travelers about. Some brave merchants were saddling up their ground-dragons, prepping to take advantage of the light travel and make a mornings trade run to the neighboring Ladrима. Other than that, the main road was relatively vacant and abandoned. The sun had just barely begun to shyly creep up over the large thistle trees, blanketing the village in a low orange hue.

Hand in hand, Emilia and Subaru kept to themselves as they made for the village exit. Emilia had again worn her cloak over her head to hide her half-elven ears. It would be best if they avoid attention this morning.

After a few minutes, a small sign caught the attention of Subaru. *Weapons and Wares*, it read.

Indeed, they did need supplies, or at least Subaru needed some sort of weapon so they could defend themselves on the perilous road to Priestella. It would be wise for them to arm themselves. Subaru wouldn't mind purchasing a cloak for himself either, or maybe some clothes more suitable for travel. He had to admit, his present Earthling attire wasn't the best for avoiding unwanted attention.

Pointing his finger to the small shop, Subaru led Emilia inside of the humble abode.

What awaited them inside was a rather simple store, with basic armaments ranging from swords to axes hanging on the wall for purchase. Other than those, the store had cloaks, travelling equipment, and other fine leathers available for interested customers. Looking closer at the pieces, the items looked to be of rather high quality.

"Welcome, good sir—!" the shop owner greeted, receiving the pair enthusiastically as they entered. "Would I be able to interest you young adventurers in some of my fine wares?" He pointed to the vast assortment of weapons on the wall.

Subaru paused momentarily in thought, before responding. "I'm looking for a simple sword—something low-key which doesn't bring a lot of attention to myself," he said, pointing at a medium-sized blade adorned with leather grip, plain pommel and simple cross guard. It looked perfect. "May I hold it, sir?"

"Most certainly," he agreed as he carefully removed the blade from the wall. He handed it to Subaru with one hand on the flat and the other on the handle.

Taking the blade from the man, he noticed it was devilishly light and balanced for such a well-sized blade. Running his finger over the edge of the blade, he accidentally cut himself as his finger glossed over edge of it. It was very sharp indeed.

"Careful now," the shopkeeper advised, and then he continued, "All of my blades here were forged in the Holy Kingdom of Guesteko, they are of the highest quality." He was quite proud of his work.

"How much gold coins does a blade of this make run?"

"Around... let's say, one-hundred blessed gold pieces."

"One-hundred?" Subaru replied, shocked. He didn't have nearly enough to afford such a weapon.

Noticing his surprise, the man took the blade back from Subaru and hung it back on the wall. "I'm afraid so," he said sorrowfully.

Emilia watched Subaru drop his shoulders in resignation, recognizing they were, in fact, very poor. From behind, she took his right hand in her left and gave it a gentle squeeze of reassurance. He

flinched and briefly turned to meet her soft gaze.

Subaru turned back toward the shopkeeper who was tending to his work again, probably assuming he had lost yet another customer. "I don't have enough..." he admitted, clearly disappointed with himself. He turned on his heel and led Emilia out the door, letting the door slam on the way out.

"Come back soon!" the shopkeeper called insincerely, continuing his work alone.

As the pair stepped out of the shop, Subaru cursed to himself. "Dammit, we need money, but how?"

Before, they had gained all their money from Roswaal L. Mathers. He had supplied them with all they needed, unsolicited or not. The Mathers mansion was an absolute treasure trove of gold, gear, and any provision you could imagine.

Cut off from their primary source of income, they had to find alternative ways to make it in this cruel world. He peered a glancing look to Emilia, who stood quietly next to him. She clearly understood their need for money and his frustration. It was a normalcy for most people in Lugnica to be struggling to make ends meet. They had just been lucky up until now.

Suddenly, his thought was cut short by a violent scream coming from the west. It was so piercing it nearly alerted the entire village, as the common settlers opened up the wood flaps of their windows to see what the commotion was.

"Over by the river?" Emilia questioned, pointing in the direction from whence it came.

"Let's go—!" Subaru took her hand and they made their way in the direction of the plea for help.

Even through all the pain and suffering they had endured, their instinctual drive to help others still drove them to come to the aid of others.

The two hurried quickly across the green meadow which separated itself from the main portion of the village and the docks. The village itself was completely encircled by a wall for protection, save for the portion of the village which bordered the west riverbank. There lay a small dock used by fishing boats and transportation ships to ferry people to and from the opposite sides of the river.

By now, many different commoners had come outside to see what had occurred, and others were already running in the direction of the volatile scream. After a moments time, Subaru and Emilia noticed a frenzied man running toward them with blood splattered violently over his torso.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," he cried hysterically while holding out his bloodied hands. "Look at this, my daughter, she's all over me. The monster took her. It took her... to the riverbank. She's gone, she's gone, she's gone..." He repeated it over and over, clearly losing his mind. He collapsed from sorrow in front of Subaru and Emilia, sobbing uncontrollably.

While Subaru stared dumbfoundedly at the inconsolable man, Emilia knelt next to him, placing her hand on the grieving man's back in an effort to calm him.

"Please, sir..." she had asked him with the upmost grace and understanding. "Tell us what happened, so we may help." Even though it was a gesture common to her good character, it was otherwise ineffective.

The father looked up at her with red, swollen, tear laden eyes. "It's all my fault... All my fault... We were going to go fishing in the early morning. We were preparing the boat, my daughter Marissa was helping me, and as she was taking our equipment to the boat, she turned to tell me

something, and then, she... It came, it came for her. It took her. I don't know what it was... but it took her." The man choked back a sob and broke down, completely overtaken by grief, and unable to speak any longer.

Emilia just held him and decided it was best not to pry any longer. She looked up at Subaru with worried, innocent eyes.

Subaru nodded in understanding. "I'll go take a look."

As he turned toward the docks, he heard someone call out for him.

"Wait, boy!"

Turning to face the crowd gathered around the father, he saw the shopkeeper from earlier holding the blade he had chosen in his hand.

He approached Subaru and held out the blade in reverse, with the pommel facing away from himself. "Here, take this," he said. "It would be unwise to face such a devilish creature unarmed, as brave as you may be, boy."

Taking it by the grip, Subaru nodded in appreciation. "Thank you," he said, as he gripped the blade with both hands, testing its weight. It was perfect.

He was no veteran warrior by any means, but he had more than basic understanding of how to use a sword due to his training with Wilhelm van Astrea. Lowering the finely crafted weapon to his side, he turned back toward the docks, and took off running.

When he began to approach the docks, he felt a cold chill take his body. It was nervousness, he assumed—a normal thing to have in the face of death and danger. However, now it was different—he *really* had to be careful. He could no longer use Return by Death to cheat the normal fragility of life. He now was just merely a mortal human, but that didn't mean he was useless in times of danger.

The docks themselves were worn down by the murky river upon which they rest upon. Clearly, this settlement had been here far longer than the village itself. The wood which the dock was built upon had clearly rotted beyond recognition. He wondered how it even still stood there without collapsing.

Without a word, he approached carefully, paying close attention to the surrounding sound of the environment. Other than the slow, easy swaying of the river's water, he could hear nothing else. A freshly spilt blood trail led from the base of the docks all the way down to the edge, where a solemn boat danced up and down against the river's sway. No doubt that was the father's boat, and no doubt this blood trail belonged to his unfortunate daughter.

The beast had clearly escaped with her, and there would most likely be no rescue party sent for her. The amount of blood let here was obscene, and Subaru doubted sorrowfully no human could survive such a devastating wound.

As he stepped carefully over the rotted dock, he noticed a larger-than-normal pool of blood next to the vacant boat itself. He knelt down next to it to get a closer look, noticing it had a bright red hue to it. No doubt it was arterial blood, meaning the victim had long since succumbed to their injuries even if they managed to escape.

Grimacing, Subaru stood up and stepped over the gore to inspect the empty boat. It only had a few fishing tools in it and not much else. Nothing here was evidence enough of who or what conducted

such a merciless attack. It was probably some ancient demon beast. Twisted witches' spawn were generally the causes for Lugnica's random disappearances.

The water's soothing back-and-forth roll contrasted heavily with the brutal and gruesome scene which had played out at this very location. Subaru sighed heavily to himself. The creature was brazened enough to strike just after sunrise. Whatever it was, it was confident enough of its capability to escape without unwanted attention, and its strike was swift enough to take a victim into the water with no resistance.

Understandably, with no tracks, bite marks, or anything worthy to identify the creature, the investigative process would be almost impossible to push through.

This was some mess, Subaru thought shamefully. Now a father was without his daughter, and no justice or peace would be brought to him. He didn't have anything to bury, or any hope for justice enacted upon a completely unwarranted murder. It was a terrible predicament all around, and he could do *nothing* to help it.

Soft footsteps approached from behind, as Subaru stood pensively on the bloodied dock. Turning to face the newcomer, Subaru came face to face with a worried Emilia. Her soft silver bangs blew gently in the morning breeze, and she stood silently just off the docks. She, too, eyed the blood worryingly.

"This is horrible," Emilia said, covering her mouth with her hand. The smell of death in the air was profuse, and she could feel herself wanting to take herself away from the area immediately—but still, she stayed.

"Yeah..." he replied. Nothing else really needed to be said.

He turned around with his sword still in his hand, useless now as it was. The creature was long gone, and with it, an innocent girl's life.

"What should we do now, Subaru?" Emilia asked him.

"I don't know."

"But we can't let the monster keep attacking. This isn't the first time. Another girl was taken last week, the villagers told me."

Carefully, Subaru walked silently off the dock. Emilia continued looking at him with all the concern and worry she gave to everyone's plight. Subaru knew she cared so deeply about everyone, and then suddenly, he came to an understanding: *She truly was special*, he thought.

The sun now shone brightly down from above as it began to make its pass over the sky and through the fluffy clouds. There was a soft breeze in the air, much out of the ordinary with their current situation.

"There's a bounty on the monster," she added to him, in hopes to regain his interest. It worked, because Subaru stopped immediately in his tracks. "Four-hundred blessed gold Lugnica marks is the reward, I heard from one of the villagers."

"Oh?" he questioned, turning slightly toward her. "This isn't the first time the monster had attacked? So, he's a repeat offender, eh?"

She nodded to him and said, "Yes, just last week, another woman was taken from the shore of this riverbank, just a little way to the south from here. She too was taken without a trace, they told me."

The villagers had suspected she had drowned in the water, but now their concerns are much graver than that."

"I see," he said, frowning and motioning for her to come. "Let us go and speak with the leader of the village about this bounty."

She smiled to him, happy she had convinced him to help the villagers. Even if it was for a selfish reason, she knew they could use the gold for their own needs.

Although it seemed to Subaru they were pursuing down a dangerous path, given his apparent lack of Return by Death, he still found himself a little bit excited for some adventure. He would have to plan carefully from now on, instead of running headfirst into battles they clearly could not win. This was life or death now, as obvious of an ultimatum as that was. It had been some time since he legitimately feared death, and now, he felt the pangs of mortality nipping ever so diligently at his shoulder.

As the pair walked slowly back to the main village, he looked back at his half-elf companion. She followed silently behind him, but he motioned for her to come walk side-by-side with himself, extending an open palm for her to grasp. She happily nodded and picked up her pace, linking her hand to his, walking next to one another now.

She was his partner, and he needed her by his side. She gave him a loving smile, and he returned a nonchalant grin himself. He had to be strong for her, because she was so strong for him. She was so kindhearted, and it was her nature to help others in need, and she couldn't just sit idly by and let a beast instill such fear in this little village. No, Emilia hadn't really changed. Even though she had matured and come to grips with her emotions and self, more than she had before, she still was Emilia at heart. The good-natured, well-mannered and benevolent girl whose only drive was to bring happiness and prosperity to the world, even if people didn't want it from her.

She faced such animosity simply because she was a half-elf. It infuriated him. It was sad, and for that, he would support her in anything she wanted to do.

Soon, the two approached a much grander building than most other establishments surrounding it, located at the very center of the village. It was odd to see such a nice building contrast those of the surrounding, more simple houses. It was well furnished on the outside with decorative designs similar to those found near the royal palace of Lugnica. The closer they neared, they noticed the grand entrance to the long hall was blocked off by two guards.

"Halt!" the guards who stood watch boomed, raising their armaments—signaling the pair to cease movement. "What business does a boy who carries a sword not in a sheath, and a girl, donning a witch-like cloak, have with Neryemar, village head of Nicia?"

Stepping back slightly at the less than warm welcome, Subaru suddenly realized walking around with an unsheathed sword probably wasn't the best of ideas.

Keeping his blade low, he extended out a hand in a gesture of peace. "We have come to speak about the bounty and the monster which plagues your village," he exclaimed, while gesturing them to lower their weapons. "We mean your village no harm."

The guards, still curious about their strange guests, slowly lowered their weapons. "You have a strange look about ye' for monster hunters. Don't take ye' for much."

"Looks can be deceiving..." Subaru said, as he held out his weapon for them to disarm him. The guard took his sword from him, and they let the two pass by without further incident.

And yet, after a short time, the pair found themselves in a longhall standing before a lordly man sitting upon a throne.

Other than appearances, Neryemar of Nicia wasn't a lord by any means. He wasn't bestowed any titles of nobility by any king or monarchy. Even still, he held himself to a higher regard than most others, as one of high taste and high respectability, even if it may not had been real or authentic.

He eyed the pair carefully who stood so brazenly in his halls.

He hadn't called for any meeting with them, nor had he ever heard or seen the likes of them in his village before. He was, quite simply, irritated they had found themselves sharing his very company.

The guards who stood watch behind the unusual pair continued to gaze mindlessly ahead. No one had said a word since their arrival. Neryemar decided he would break the ice.

"What, pray tell," he asked, scratching the scruff of his beard with one hand, and toying with a wine glass in the other, "Can I do for two younglings no older than my son or daughter? I have pressing matters to attend to, mind you both. Please do not waste my time with any foolishness or game."

The boy in question stepped forward at the lordly man's beckon. "We are here about the monster attacks which have plagued your village as of late. We would offer our services in return for the bounty, which is what we have come to discuss. We also wouldn't mind any other leads you might have based on the prior attacks."

"Ah, I see," Neryemar snorted, eyeing Subaru amusingly. "So, these are the warriors who I must send to deal with this menace? Not a Kingdom Knight, or a member of the Royal Guard, are you? No, I didn't think as much. What services can a boy and a girl offer me?"

"See, that's where you're wrong," Subaru chided the pseudo-lord. "My partner here is a renowned spirit-arts user, who can use the surrounding spirits of this land to cast all manner of magic. And I... I *am* a knight, although I will not give you my companion's nor my name. We wish to keep our identities anonymous."

He pointed at himself for triumphant effect. Emilia stood by, withholding a devious smirk. She decided she would let Subaru do the bargaining, as he had become quite good at it.

The village head nodded in firm understanding, clearly easy to convince and perhaps more than a little desperate, despite appearances. Standing up from his gold-studded chair, he opened a small chest near the base of his desk and withdrew a small coin pouch from it. He plopped it down on the desk without much care of thought.

"One-hundred blessed gold marks in advance pay," he stated, taking a long sip of wine from his jewel adorned cup. "And three-hundred more for a job well done. Bring me the head of the beast. I want it mounted on my wall as decoration for its misdeeds."

Taking the healthy gold pouch from the wood carved table, Subaru smiled as he gripped it in his hand. "I'll bring you its head," he claimed, pausing to take a seat in front of the man now that he had gotten his full and honorable attention. "Now, let's talk about the previous attacks. Do you have any information which could help us in our search for the creature?"

"Certainly, if you wish..." Neryemar scowled, taking another long draw of wine from his cup, rendering it empty. He motioned for the servant adjacent to him to refill it, to which he did so

promptly. "The first sighting was not but a fortnight ago. Down by the riverbank, a scouting patrol noticed something sneaking around mischievously on the opposite side of the river. They didn't think much of it then, but it seemed to be something out of the ordinary, so a notice was put out in the village to tread carefully after dark. However, the first attack came just before dawn the following week."

He retrieved a bloody ruby necklace from the desk drawer and tossed it on the table. "This belonged to the victim, a young woman no older than twenty years. It wasn't a calculated killing or robbery, as this medallion is quite valuable, so we suspected foul play. There wasn't a body ever found, just blood, gore and savagery. We kept it under hush to the rest of the village as not to cause panic. However, judging by today's attack, it seems our little beast has a penchant for young women, and it makes its attack just one week apart, at the break of dawn. Quite a simple thing to be understood, really."

"So, the beast is a repeat offender, and he has a methodology to his work, huh," Subaru said, rubbing his temple in thought. "Thank you for the information, *sir*." He made sure to accentuate the politeness of his address at the end.

"It goes without question the beast has some capability..." The noble man swished the wine in his cup back and forth methodically, before continuing with a darker, more somber tone. "I sent a scouting patrol across the riverbank to search for the missing woman, but they never returned. Since then, I have sent envoys to the capital to request help from the Kingdom Knights but, yet none have returned as well. I fear the worst for them, and it renders us all but cut off from aid."

"So, it's that bad then," Subaru replied. This situation was worse than he thought. It was no simple beast they were dealing with, no. This was clearly something more—a demon beast for sure.

He scoffed darkly. "Oh yes, these kinds of beasts are unfortunately all too common in these remote areas. The undisturbed nature of the surrounding area gives them ample grounds for breeding and nesting without problem."

Subaru sighed heavily to himself; this was indeed a mess.

Surprisingly, Emilia stepped up, her soft, gentle voice breaking the thoughts of the two engaged men. "Sir, if I may question you so, why hasn't Priestella sent for aid? You are under Priestella's umbrella of protection, are you not?" Her penchant for concern was clearly laden in her worried voice. She stared at the man with vibrant amethyst eyes, not that he could see them through her magic cloak.

Neryemar frowned gravely at this question. "No, unfortunately. Due to unfortunate taxation and trade disputes recently, Priestella has removed Nicia from their realm. Even though we are well within their boundaries, we are indeed now a lone village without a banner. Although I pride myself on our independence, we simply do not have the personnel needed for hunting dangerous monsters such as these."

"That is most unfortunate," Emilia replied. Unfortunate such petty quarrels existed in such a civilized land as Lugnica was. With such dangerous creatures prowling around, all settlements required adequate protection to keep peace for its people.

"Indeed," he replied evenly, drinking from his cup pensively. "But that is of no matter. We still can request aid from the capital, but I fear the beast is snatching our envoys from the road. It's intelligent, that much is sure."

"We understand," Subaru nodded, adding his thanks. "We deeply appreciate the information. We

will do our best to take care of it." Sticking the fat money pouch into his pocket, he stood to take his leave.

"Just one more thing," Neryemar added, his expression growing dark and serious. "Be careful if you go beyond the wood across from the riverbank. There are things much worse than these beasts out there. Do not trust anyone and keep your wits about you."

Subaru nodded. "Thanks for the warning. We will try to keep our heads alert."

Neryemar raised his jeweled cup to the pair in a toast of good-will. "To your success and good health, I bid you farewell."

Nodding his thanks one final time, Subaru collected his weapon from the guard, and together he and Emilia walked toward the exit of the village head's quarters.

Neryemar watched them carefully... and with a curious suspicion, he took one final sip from his cup.

* * *

Subaru gazed comfortably out into the dimly-lit horizon, the distant lights of Nicia twinkling in the far-off distance. Dusk was falling now, blanketing them in shadow. In front of him rest a roaring fire, crackling with life, whose flames provided a much-needed warmth to offset the cool air of the night. On the opposite side of the fire sat Emilia, who drew her small, pale hands closer to the flame to help stifle the chilly environment.

They rested just across the river, having ferried over it quite some time ago, on the edge of the old, dark forest which they had been so warned about. What surrounded them was nothing but wilderness, with a few ruins and craggy, long-forgotten remnants of castles which were abandoned some time ago. However, the night was nothing but peaceful, as they hadn't had any sighting of the so-called monster which they were hunting.

As a frosty gust of wind blew between the two, the fire roared just as fiercely in response, each element feeding on each other.

Emilia shivered and drew her hands closer to the empowered fire. She now wore more accommodating attire—indeed fit for travel and adventure. She was covered from head-to-toe in high quality leather: a pair of brown leather jackboots, with a cotton white long sleeve undershirt, and a simple leather jerkin over the top of it. Likewise, Subaru also wore a similar studded leather jerkin and undershirt, with a newly-acquired scabbard to house his blade, which hung from his brown belt. The two of them also wore warm, bountiful green cloaks to keep the elements at bay.

They'd procured a number of useful supplies using their advance pay. Likewise, the shopkeeper from earlier also allowed Subaru to keep the blade he had given him, in hopes he would indeed slay the monster plaguing the village. His reasoning was it had ruined his business, and he wanted nothing short of it being rid of. Let the sword's price be his investment into this quest, he said.

The two sat quietly, wondering how they would fell the monster which they had set out to kill. Truthfully enough, he had wondered about Emilia and her elusive spirit, Puck. He had been meaning to ask her about it, but he truly did not want to pry any more than he had to.

Just earlier, he struggled to light the fire in front of them with a flint and tinder. She had giggled at his struggle, and then what followed amazed him. He had seen her snap her fingers together, whisper something—and from the tip of her finger conjured a small flame to light the wood—

giving him the idea how she warmed the bath from earlier.

So, she could cast magic without Puck, Subaru thought. "Emilia?" he then asked, breaking the comfortable silence. He fingered the pommel of his blade as he continued. "How is it that you can cast magic without Puck now?" It was a brief but straightforward question.

Emilia looked down slightly as she heard him, uncharacteristically nervous to respond. After a moment, she met eyes with him. "Well, I don't really know myself," she said, as Subaru looked at her, slightly confused. "For some reason, I recalled I can use magic on my own. I'm not sure why, or how, but something happened the night we escaped the Sanctuary. I'm sorry if that's not a good answer." She nervously toyed with the lifeless, dull crystal which rested at the base of her chest, and continued, "I haven't been able to contact Puck for a long time now. I hope he did not break his contract with me..." Her weakened voice trailed off as she finished.

Noticing her worry over Puck, Subaru stood and walked over to her, taking a seat right next to her.

Reassuringly, he reached an arm around her in a small but meaningful gesture. "Don't worry, Emilia," he comforted her, as Emilia retreated into his embrace, enjoying his much-needed company. "I'm sure Puck is okay, wherever he is, and I'm sure he has his reasons."

"May it be so..." she whispered, snuggling into his safe, warm confines.

She missed Puck, but what she had lost in their father-daughter relationship, she had more than gained in her newfound love with Subaru. That didn't keep her from worrying about him, however. He was all she knew for the many young years of her long life, and she just wanted to make sure he was okay. If indeed he broke his contract with her, then at the very least she wanted to understand why he had done so. Puck had made a promise to her—she knew he would keep it.

Subaru didn't quite know what Emilia was going through internally, but he held her tight anyway. She had been there so many times for him in his dark moments; this was the least he could offer her. And so, he just held her even tighter, protecting her in his own special way.

"Hey, Emilia?" he whispered to her, gently brushing her bangs from her eyes. She looked up to him, with vibrant purple orbs. "I'm happy to be with you." It was simple, but true.

Emilia flinched; his plain, raw words filling her with emotion. "Me too," she replied, barely above a whisper.

Subaru almost didn't hear her response, but he understood it perfectly anyway. She had buried her face in his arms, and the two sat cozily by the fire for quite some time, enjoying the clear night sky. During their embrace, Subaru spent his time counting the everlasting stars above, watching the full moon shine ever watchful over them like a beacon in the dark.

It was easy to enjoy time like this in the presence of Emilia. He didn't mind the small, meaningful moments like this he would remember forever. In fact, it was these small moments he cherished more above all else. Even though he still craved adventure to some degree, he wouldn't have any issue with settling down somewhere quiet, undisturbed by the passages of time, with her by his side.

If only it were possible.

Emilia's breath was evenly paced, but ne'er did she sleep. Tonight wasn't the night for that—no, unfortunately they had business to attend to, but for now, she would just enjoy the tranquility of this sweet moment. The two shared an innocent embrace by a warm, toasty fire, undisturbed by the

happenings of the world.

Sheer chance did not bring them together like this, nor was it happenstance she was growing to love her shared time with Subaru. Although the pain and suffering the two had endured was insurmountable, and all of those they had lost still pained them, she still felt blessed to be held by him.

Some time had passed before the last few dying embers of the flame began to burn out, leaving just the hazy charcoaled ash which blew out with one hefty gust of wind. It was by then the two decided they would set out into the dark unknowns of the wood which awaited them.

Preparing their equipment and gathering their wits about them, the two took a route off the beaten path, which clearly had long since been abandoned. Soon, they were absorbed into the mass of trees.

The immense, sprawling redwoods, clearly older than any living mortal, hung over them like vultures ready to claim its dying prey. Long, thick, grey moss cascaded from their winding branches, and their massive roots jutted up out of the ground, as if the trees themselves were standing above ground.

Subaru kept his hand prepared and ready on the pommel of his sword as the two moved carefully throughout the unknowns of the ancient wood. It was eerily quiet... *too* quiet—lifeless, almost, as if all the residents of the forest fled from it long ago. Emilia kept pace quietly behind him, alert and ready if anything dangerous would come to pass. However, as the two moved deeper and deeper into the mystical wood, nothing came.

By now, they were quite a way into the woodland, without seeing a single solitary sign of life. It was peculiar... no, more than peculiar—it was just utterly strange. The atmosphere was thick and heavy, as if gravity was heavier here than all other places. The air was hot and humid, and the breeze which blew so consistently earlier was nowhere to be found. It was an odd sensation to say the least, as if they had stepped into another world entirely.

Taking a seat on one of the twisted sprawling roots, Subaru sighed to himself. "I don't understand what's going on here," he said, scratching his chin in thought. "There's nothing here." There was less than nothing.

Nests nestling deeply in the jagged holes of the oaks had long since been abandoned. The intricate roots which looped in and out and around, ripe for shelter of all kinds, lay devoid of all life. There weren't even any insects crawling around in this forest, nor were they buzzing obnoxiously in Subaru's ear as they always did. The forest was just completely devoid of life. Everything was *gone*.

Emilia looked down at Subaru worryingly, meeting his eyes with hers. She was clearly uneasy in both her movements and expression. Something was bothering her, but he didn't quite know what.

"I don't think we should be here any longer," she advised to him quietly, taking his hand. "We should go back to the edge of the forest."

"What's wrong, Emilia?"

"I couldn't quite feel it before, but I think this place is cursed," she said, gently squeezing his hand before continuing. "By *who* or *what*, I don't know. But we need to leave, *now*, before we become cursed as well."

"A curse?" Subaru asked, remembering the black magic which was cast upon him, causing the deaths of his friend and himself. He stood immediately at the remembrance of such an aberration.

Now that he was made aware of it, he could feel its odd presence too. *That* was the weight which he felt pushing down upon him. It was an odd sensation in the air to which words had difficulty explaining. Nevertheless, they needed to get away from here, and *fast*.

Hand in hand, the two began quickly toward the exit of the cursed forest.

As they ran, they could feel the woods on either side of them quickly becoming thicker and denser than it had been before. The trees were larger, as if growing in response to their fear—one looming on Subaru's shoulder, as if something dangerous was hovering over him, waiting to strike. The faster they ran, the further it felt the exit was growing away from them, as if they were running backwards.

Something was warping their senses.

It was foul magic, that's for sure, Subaru thought. Even so, it couldn't be real—it was all just in their heads—and so he kept up the pace. Any minute now, they should be through the clearing and out into the grey meadow before the river. He could feel Emilia gripping his hand so tightly, the whites of her knuckles were showing now. She was scared, more scared than he was.

"Dammit!" he cursed as panic started to rise up in his voice. "Where is it... Where is the exit?" It *had* to be close.

They had been running for what felt like twenty minutes, covering a distance far longer than the one they had traversed during their careful walk through the forest. Either time or space was being manipulated, or their sense of those was being distorted. It could be one or the other, but it didn't matter, because both felt just as bad.

Suddenly, without warning, they crashed through what felt like a pane of thick solid glass. Shattering the spell, they broke through and fell near the base of the forest.

Crashing to the dirt unexpectedly, Subaru felt like he was being suffocated, as if something was grasping his throat, choking the life from his body slowly. He scrambled in terror, holding his pounding chest as Emilia crawled over to him. She leaned over him to see what was wrong.

With panic painted on her face, she placed her palm on his chest, whispering some incantation frantically to herself. He could hear a small, humming sound, and a faint warm light emanated from the palm of her hand. The soothing warmth spread over his body, and he could feel his breath slowly return to normal.

Subaru lay there, and with Emilia still on top of him, he felt around his throat as if he was still struggling to breathe. Now that it was gone, he realized what he was doing, and he relaxed himself, breathing in and out slowly, as his senses returned to normal. Feeling the cool air pass through his lungs yet again, he breathed a deep sigh of relief.

What the hell was that? he thought. Then, he noticed Emilia leaning over him, clearly worried to death about him. Her eyes were glistening with small tears, and she held him with such care and devotion it surprised even him.

She was scared to lose him. He was the last person she had in this world, as sad as that may sound. He cursed himself silently for scaring her like he did. He would do his best to be more careful next time. Yet again, he went into a situation he couldn't yet handle by himself, and almost got himself

killed. It was a bad habit he had to be sure.

"Somebody placed a curse over the entire woods," Emilia explained, hugging him in desperation. She was emotional as her voice fluctuated rapidly. "I'm so sorry I didn't notice soon enough. I'm so sorry, Subaru." She repeated her sorrow over and over to him.

"Figures it was a curse..." he sighed, wrapping his arms around the panicked half-elf. "Hey, Emilia, you didn't do anything wrong. Come on, it's okay." He tried to calm her down, to reassure her he was okay, but it was difficult.

In essence, she *really* didn't do anything wrong, but it was Emilia's natural behavior to blame herself for things happening to Subaru. It was more his fault than her own. She didn't know any better, and it was wrong to let her shoulder the blame for it.

"No..." she replied, tightening her grip on Subaru. "As a magic user, I should be able to detect something like that. We should never have made it that far inside without me noticing. It was almost too late—any longer, and we would have become cursed as well."

He figured it was something sort of like that. Once they had busted out of the confines of the curse, something akin to a safeguard activated, probably to keep people from escaping. However, for some reason, it didn't have the devastating effect whoever casted it would have liked. Or maybe it did, and Emilia just prevented it from spreading in time. He guessed he had taken the brunt of the spell because he was in front of Emilia when they broke out so spontaneously.

"What a weird experience that was," he admitted, as he held his chest—his hectic breathing quickly returning to normal. "Who would be powerful enough to place a curse on an entire forest?"

Emilia shook her head. "I don't know... but maybe it could be the one responsible for murdering the townspeople?"

"Possibly," Subaru agreed. "There's no doubt these past events are connected to one another."

It was certainly suspect. A curse on an entire forest, envoys going missing, and people being snatched away from their homes, never to be seen again. This sounded like something to do with the Witch Cult. They were a devious and most disgusting band of freaks, that's for sure. However, there was a possibility this had nothing to do with them at all.

Whatever the case may be, someone was going through great lengths to keep people out of that forest, and for what reason Subaru didn't even want to guess. No doubt something sinister was happening, and it was happening right under the noses of the Kingdom Knights of Lugnica and Priestella.

"At any rate," he said, running his hand through his hair. "We should return back to the village and share with Neryemar the knowledge we have gained from this." He stood and gathered himself, shaking off the haunt of death which threatened him yet again. "This may be bigger than just a mere monster taking people from the river."

Emilia nodded in agreement, gathering herself as well.

With such a powerful curse like that over a wood stretching for miles, it's unlikely a simple demon beast was responsible. The more likely culprit would be someone more of Roswaal L. Mathers' caliber—a powerful mage or sorcerer who had both the skill and power to perform such an incantation.

To be able to manipulate time and space like that and to such a degree... Emilia had never seen

such power before, let alone witnessed it firsthand and even nearly become a victim of it. It was an experience she would not like to take part in again.

It was still relatively early into the morning, probably a few hours past midnight. They had to return to the village and warn them of what happened. After a moment's time, they began to cross over the hill and down into the clearing by the riverbank.

Far off into the distance, they could see a heavy smoke blanketing the horizon.

"No way..." Subaru uttered quietly. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Where the once bustling and prosperous village of Nicia used to be, was in its place a blazing, seething fire, which consumed the entire village in devastation. Its inferno was so bright it pierced the night sky for miles upon miles of land.

"Oh, no..." Emilia whispered, her face displaying all the emotions of someone in terror. She held onto Subaru as they witnessed the destruction of the village they had left just moments ago.

The two stared in sheer horror at the sight before them.

Above the carnage and destruction, the moon still hung brilliantly over the fire blazing below it, all of it reflecting calmly onto the peacefully flowing river.

Against the Grain of Tragedy

Before the weight of their ineluctable toil eluded him no more, Subaru suddenly realized they were probably making a very grave mistake. Every instinct he had was screaming at himself to paddle downstream, not across it as they were.

Escape, he told himself over and over. Against his turmoil and destruction of the self, he gritted his teeth, furrowed his brow, and continued wading through the boggy water, drawing a line through the two pernicious hells.

Their boat rocked against the wind-stricken waters. To his back rested the cursed wood, and to his front remained nothing but a solemn memory of a village once teeming with life, sadistically reduced to nothingness. He then looked back for a moment, suddenly realizing why he acted so contradictory of himself; in a race against time, Emilia paddled just as furiously as he.

Something odd bit at him; the futility of her hope was what it was. She clung desperately to it like how a child would to her mother. It was a small, feeble hope that maybe—just *maybe*—they could save at least one life among the ruins, while unwittingly risking their own in the process. Subaru knew better of it, but even so, he could not garner the courage to speak up. Such destruction was something beyond their capability to alter, and the past could not so easily be undone like it had been before. It was his fault, he figured. Still, she did not know about his former power, nor would he ever let the idea of it escape his lips again.

Their wooden dinghy bobbed clumsily up and down as it struggled to find its way across the water. They were almost to the other side of the river now, close enough to feel the heat of the burning village and clear enough to see burning ashes and embers filling the darkness around them with small speckles of light.

The everlasting moon above was now hidden, blanketed in a thick, sooty smoke, banishing its presence and allowing no betrayal of the night enshrouding them. However, the encroaching flames of the village began to envelop the area in all its ferocity, splashing horrid red paint against the dark canvas of the night.

It was a queer thing to witness. The world took up something of an insidious red hue, almost like they had taken a wrong turn into some otherworldly hell. Even the usual murky green water reflected the devilish light in such a way the water itself appeared to burn with both fury and ardor.

With Emilia at his back, Subaru bit back a curse, and against his own better instinct, refused to back down. As their creaking boat made one final lurch forward, it docked itself unceremoniously onto the bank of the river.

Rotten wood met damp dirt. With sword in hand, Subaru jumped out of the dinghy, landing with a thud onto the riverbank. Behind him, Emilia stepped carefully out of the boat. He noticed her breathing was uneven, signifying her unease and distress. Wordlessly, she nodded to Subaru, and he returned the gesture in kind. Facing forward, he peered in the direction of the fire.

It was now or never. Soon, all which would remain of the village would be the charred remnants of precious lives lost.

Staying low to the ground, Subaru cautiously approached a nearby bush to survey the area under some sort of cover. Emilia was careful in following him, their pace matching almost step for step. Subaru looked over the clearing, observing the bonfire which was the village of Nicia.

It was lifeless, and apart from the rising heat which brought beads of sweat to his forehead, there wasn't much else of note. The flames roared and crackled with life, the wooden settlements providing more than enough base for a healthy blaze. The air he took into his lungs became more and more polluted with each breath. They had to be quick if they were to do anything meaningful here.

Subaru narrowed his eyes. Beyond the clearing separating the village from the small harbor, there was a small, almost unnoticeable shuffle in the distance, vanishing just as quickly as it appeared. It could be someone in need of help.

"Look, over there!" Emilia pointed out, her voice a whisper barely reaching his ear.

She must have noticed it too, because she was pointing in the same direction. Subaru looked back to Emilia, and then back to the roaring fires. He let out a haggard sigh and withdrew his blade from its sheathe.

It was too late to turn back now. Indeed, he was just as curious as anyone else would be in this situation. He wasn't sure what could have caused the destruction of this place in such a short time, but he could probably name a few likely candidates.

He stepped over the brush and moved carefully through the overgrown path. He paid close attention to his surroundings, making sure they were not to be seen. Sweat pooled at his forehead now, the growing heat from the fires quelling the previous cool nights air.

With keen ears, Subaru listened closely for any signs of life, but he heard nothing but the sounds of flame bursting, as it consumed everything it met. It was something he somewhat expected.

Behind him, Emilia had strayed from Subaru's side ever so slightly. Her breath was labored in the smoky haze which surrounded them. She strained herself not to cough and give away their presence.

Suddenly, in the distance between two burning buildings, she could barely hear what sounded like a plea for help. Although it was difficult to hear through the wild howl of the flames, she could still make out the vague syllables. She focused herself in the direction of the faint voice, pulling her attention away from her surroundings.

Preoccupied with the voice, she didn't even realize Subaru had left her side some time ago. Slowly, she approached the distant voice. She heard it again, clearer than it had been before. Something was not right, however, as the voice which seemed to originate from the burning cottage in front of her had changed direction. Now it was much closer than before—*too close*.

Emilia froze, now focused on what was going on around her. She could hear heavy footsteps, too heavy to be Subaru's. Her eyes widened at the dark aura approaching her. Without moving, she prepared a small counter spell with her right hand. Her hand radiated faintly with a small flame. She had to be quick.

"What do we have here?"

Emilia turned to face the direction of the sinister voice, but it was too late.

A coarse, dirty hand covered her mouth to keep her from speaking the incantation to finish the spell, and a knife just brushed over her neck. Her heart dropped, and she froze in terror in the bandit's grasp. She could feel the coolness of the blade pressed firmly against her skin. The vagabond tightened his grip on her, making sure to stifle any attempted plea for help.

She couldn't make out her assailant quite clearly, but he appeared to be a younger man, maybe in his late twenties. His face eluded her, concealed under the confines of a dark hood.

The bandit whispered into her pointy ear, "A half-witch whore?" He ran his coarse tongue over her ear lustfully, before continuing. "What's a precious little flower like yourself doing out here all alone, eh?"

Emilia flinched at the unwanted contact, but she dared not to fight back with the dagger pressed violently at her throat. The filthy man continued playing with her, feeling her up in places only one person was allowed access to. She felt violated. Emilia bit her tongue and shut her eyes as the man touched her. His very smell made her want to throw up, let alone the feel of his slimy hands.

"Now, Miss... I haven't felt one as soft as you in my short life-time," he said darkly, it barely a whisper through the night air. "My life may be ending soon, so just a little more, if I may?"

She shut her eyes in resignation as he continued to feel her up.

Emilia could feel something she hadn't felt for a long, long time. It was *hate*, and it burned and swelled up deep inside her. She was *nothing* to this man other than a base tool for his pleasure. She was a worthless half-elf to the common people, someone who was nothing but a bringer of bad omen and ill fortune.

The indignities she's suffering now, that he was perpetrating onto her, rung but a hollow bell toll through the ethical boundaries of humanity. Her feelings mattered not, and that made her feel such a thing as hate, more than she ever had before.

She opened her amethyst eyes.

Where had Subaru gone? He would come. She knew he would. He would rescue her, and then punish the filthy man which violated her as he did. She was sure of it. Subaru had to be close by. Wasn't he just behind her?

A sudden sharp pang in her heart knocked the air from her lungs.

No, they couldn't have...! He couldn't be gone. She tried her best to banish the thought of losing Subaru from her mind, but she felt hot tears well up in her eyes anyway. It was too much to even consider. If she lost him—he, who meant the entire world to her...? No, she couldn't even fathom it.

Silently, she cursed herself for coming here. This was all her fault. If they just left, leaving the fires in their wake, none of this would have happened. Again, her natural inclination to help others superseded her better instinct of self-preservation, and now just look where it got her.

The tears fell now, although no one cared they did.

The vagrant just grinned unpleasantly with his teeth bared in a snarl. The man had no shame in who he was or what he was doing. He probably had nothing to do with the actual village fire itself, as he was just a byproduct of its existence. It appeared he was here to loot from the destruction, uncaring of those around him or what had happened. He had violated her and paid no real attention to it.

He was quite simply, a wretched existence.

Emilia choked back a sob. If Subaru was gone, she didn't want to live in this world anymore anyway. He was all she had left.

Another man approached from the shadows behind. He was shorter than the other, although just as twisted and wild looking. He sneered at his partner's exotic find, and clapped his hand against his knee, clearly excited. The one who held her had since finished his tormenting of Emilia.

He glared at the shorter man, appearing to be somewhat unamused. "Gag her, so the witch-freak doesn't cast a spell on us," he ordered, gesturing his head sharply at her.

The short one gasped when he saw her pointed ears. With haste, he withdrew a dirty bandana from his pants pocket and inserted it into her mouth, gagging her.

She wanted to bite down on his fingers as hard as she could, but the knife was still against her neck. He wrapped another cloth around her mouth, tying the gag in place, and silenced her for good.

With newfound strength, she struggled, bucking against his coarse grasp, but the overwhelming power of the two fully grown men proved to outmatch her own feeble strength. Tired of the struggle, the man pulled the jagged knife from her throat and back handed her uncaringly across the mouth, knocking her into a daze. She lurched in his arms, unconscious.

Watching her fall limp in his arms, the other man scratched his chin, and pointed to the west. "There was another boy over yonder," he said, his heavy accent hard to understand. "No trouble he was. Got 'im good, I did. Bashed his head right in with a rock." He cackled and let out a vile, hysteric laugh.

"Where's the others?" the other man asked shortly, the disdain in his voice more evident than before.

The short one replied, "They gone back to camp already, Boss,"

"Let's head back, then," he said, patting the unconscious girl on the back mockingly. "I got us a present for the boys tonight—'gonna have a romp with this one, they will." His tone was sarcastic, but his partner probably couldn't tell.

"By the Dragon, I've never fucked a half-elf," he spluttered, spittle emanating from every syllable made audible. "I heard if you plough 'em on a full moon, you'll have magical powers come 'morn."

There was no reply, only silence considering his comment. The man scoffed and turned to the east. With Emilia still over his shoulder, he began walking away. His wordless respite signaled the other man to follow him, and so he did.

The flames still roared just as heavily as before. It would be some time before the final embers would burn out, leaving nothing but the charred remains of a village.

The man holding Emilia grinned. He had no idea what had happened here, only that his band of outlaws had seen the smoke from afar, and they came quickly to investigate. They never could have expected to find what they did. They were low on supplies themselves, and so it was the perfect opportunity to capitalize on. Having pilfered, looted, and taken all they could, their reason for being here had ended. They had to head further north, and with great haste. No doubt the law was hot on their trail. He considered what few options they had, and came to only one conclusion. They had to leave Lugnica, and *fast*.

Just two suns and two moons ago, they had robbed, stolen from, and murdered one of the wealthiest merchants in all Lugnica.

The short one called out his name, "Verizar, wait up!" He picked up speed to walk side by side with him. "Hey, Boss, why're you in such a hurry?"

The two were dressed in darkness yet again, as they had left the burning village some time ago. The moon hung patiently at their backs as their sole light source, aiding them moving through the darkened field. Close by was the sleepy forest adjacent to Nicia, which led them to the crossroads between north to Priestella and south back to the capital.

"Haven't had a shower in days," he quipped, smirking at his dirtied hands, near blackened by dirt and grime. "Wouldn't mind one, and the sooner we get to Priestella, the better."

Afterwards, the two men said nothing for a time. They had walked quite a way into the forest now, and they had made quite sure to stay off the main road. It didn't make their journey any easier, but it certainly made it safer. The road between Priestella and the capital was littered with guard patrols and other unwelcomed interference.

The two could smell something smoky and delicious coming from just up ahead. He paid close mind to his steps now, approaching both carefully and with great precision. Stepping gently through the soft ground, he eyed a small wire just under his heel. It fell in and out of focus of his sight, the thin strip almost impossible to see in the dark night. The moonlight had caught it at just the right angle, revealing its otherwise unknown presence.

He smirked to himself and stepped carefully over it. He signaled to his partner of its existence. Protective measures like this were necessary when camping out in the wilds like they were, to easily alert themselves to any unwanted company, human or beast. Much to his chagrin, his bumbling buffoon of a partner almost tripped over the wire as he stepped over it. Why he allied with such people in the first place, he would never understand.

Sighing heavily, Verizar silently judged him from afar, but he decided yet to leave it alone. By now, the girl on his shoulders would be waking soon, although he was almost unsure of why he brought her along now. Initially, he did not care what would happen to her, and maybe he would even throw her to the wolves and let his men have their way with her.

However, as he walked across the moonlit night, he eyed her as she rested fast asleep on his shoulder. He had given her some essence of wormroot to ease the ride, and sure enough, she rested well. Her face was serene, and her silver hair glistened in the softly illuminated dusk.

Probably a witch charm, he mused quietly. He wasn't soft like that. He shook away the thought of her influencing him, although he did feel some measure of pity for her, and even *some* remorse. Maybe he shouldn't have treated her like he did. Sure, he was no stranger to misdeeds. Maybe once she woke, he could set things right.

Stepping foot inside his camp, he glared at his two other associates who slept comfily under the night stars. The fire they birthed was lit dimly with a few last dying embers left before it would extinguish. The night air was cool, even if the tall pines provided some protection against the breeze.

He laid Emilia down onto a soft patch of grass and removed her gag. Her breath was even, still under full effect of the wormroot which ensnared her in a deep sleep. He took her gag and bound her wrists with it.

He was a thief—a murderer for sure—but he *did* have remorse for his past actions, somewhat more than others. The world was dark and sad, as it had always been since he was a child. Nothing had changed since he grew into adulthood, nor would it ever. The poor died in the piss and shit-filled streets prematurely, while the rich grew old, fat and eventually died surrounded by their gems, rocks and gold.

That was life as he knew it, and how many of the common folk viewed it just the same.

He sat down by the fire and drew his hands closer to the withering flame. The effect was negligible. Grimacing, he took some of the stray firewood on the side and tossed it in the pile, stoking it gently. The dry tinder was just enough to get the fire going strong again, bringing instant relief to his chilled hands.

His upbringing wasn't any excuse for his actions, and that's not to say there could ever be an excuse for what he had done. To him, it was all the same. Those who were victim of cruelties, no matter how small or consequential, sometimes dealt their own cruelties onto others in return, until only wickedness was left in the world. One cruelty produced another, and so on, and because of that, he didn't care.

In the end, he knew what he was doing, and he owned every one of the decisions he had made.

He pulled his cloak back, revealing a fair but unkempt face, covered in a dark brown scruff of a beard. His brow furrowed heavily over his dark eyes, and his wild, brown hair cascaded down past his collar—a testament to his time spent on the road without a proper cut. He could clean up quite nicely if he wanted to—not that he ever would.

It would be morning before the girl would awake, and because of that, he could afford to close his eye for a minute or two. He couldn't remember a time when he wasn't sleeping on the ground, whether it be dirt, grass or anything else.

He never had a place to call home, never staying in one place for any noteworthy time. He found himself most comfortable surrounded by nothing but the steady breeze and the natural surroundings of the trees and wildlife. No loud bustling of the big city life, no putrid smell of dragon and human shit in the air. No, he wouldn't find *those* out on the path of the wilds.

The fire next to him burnt long after Verizar had passed into the deep thralls of sleep. The steady, scented smoke of the flame cut through the trees like a silver arrow through the night.

Overtaken by rest, it was too late before he heard the gurgling sounds of death escape the mouths of his friends.

* * *

He lay face down in the dirt. Fires blazed all around him, uncaring of his existence, nor of his plight.

As he regained consciousness, his breath stirred, and he blew quick, panicked breaths from his mouth against the grimy mud. While he struggled to get his wits about him, he remembered where he was, and why he was here.

He was in the ruined village of Nicia, and he came here with Emilia. He thought he had died, but maybe he was mistaken after all. Focusing, he tried to remember who or what had attacked him, but he couldn't find the answer. There was nothing—except from the memory of him turning to call for Emilia's name, as she had unexpectedly drifted from his side—what followed was only darkness.

The dried blood encrusted over his eyes broke apart when he opened them, which were now sunken in a swirling mix of purple shades. He rose his hand to wipe the hardened blood from his eyes. His head wound had bled profusely, and it had pooled into his ears as well.

Grimacing, he propped himself up on one arm, and tried to get up. In his foolhardy attempt, he

stumbled and almost fell to the ground, catching himself at the last second.

It felt like a hammer was pounding a nail into his skull over and over, relentlessly and without mercy. The pain was all-encompassing, always there and beckoning him to fall into madness. In his nadir, his mind was processing at a very low level of coherence, but he saw the same silver-haired half-elf flash across his mind yet again.

"Emilia—!" he called out, as his heart pummeled against his sternum.

Frantically, he looked around, but he saw nothing but the remnants of a burning village. He screamed her name again and again, slurring the words as he did so. With an effort he took a step, and another. Soon, sheer willpower fueled the machinations of his shocked body. He gripped the pommel of his blade with fury and ripped it from its sheath. He fell on it for support, stabbing it into the muck.

He would make sure he would find whoever did this, and when he did, he would make them suffer. He would make them regret leaving him with his sword; a means for revenge. Too long had he dealt with such events as this. Death, devastation and chaos followed him like a ghost haunting him at every corner.

His rage fueled his desire to quell those ghosts who tormented him endlessly once and for all. He would make sure they were sorry for leaving him for dead without finishing the job, whoever it was. He would show them no mercy, no quarter, like he had done all those times before.

He heard nothing in response to his calls from the village entrapping him, and there was no sign of Emilia either. Desperate, he paced himself quickly, using his blade as a walking stick.

Suddenly, he stepped on something hard, catching his attention. He looked down and raised the heel of his boot. Underneath it lay a small emerald crystal embedded in the soil like a seed. He eyed it carefully, before realizing...

"Puck..." he whispered, reaching down to remove the lost spirit from its earthly grave.

With a closed fist, he gripped the crystal necklace so tight it drew blood in his hand. It felt good, as it took his focus off the constant agony of his skull. He was sure now something bad had befallen his Emilia.

A furious anger swelled to a head within him, and with it came desperate determination. Quietly, he seethed to himself beneath the starry night, surrounded by flames which burned in a reflection of his inner turmoil.

Suddenly, he felt a deathly chill overtake him, as if he just stepped into the middle of a raging blizzard.

The emerald jewel pulsed with life in his grasp, and he recoiled violently from a sharp, stabbing pain. Solemnly, the pendant fell to the dirt yet again, but his surroundings grew very dim, and time appeared to slow to a crawl. Flames burnt slowly, and the air became very arid and dry. *Something* prodded his subconscious, inviting themselves into his inner sanctum of mind and thought:

"They took my daughter!"

The voice was distant, and almost unclear to him, but he understood its urgency. "Wha—?" Subaru said, before he was cut off.

"To the forest east of here; go now. I will guide you to her—!"

The jewel glowed faintly, more than it had for a long time. Without warning, it shattered into a thousand tiny pale fragments, leaving nothing but a small, translucent glowing blue orb behind. The lonesome spirit hovered upward and briefly floated near Subaru, before abruptly dashing into the night sky, leaving a faint trail of dust in its wake.

Subaru knew he had little time to spare, and so he followed it before it could dissipate. It led him away from the burning village and toward the forest.

The fresh smell of the trees and crispness of the air was heady. His surroundings were like a blur, as he moved through the night with fierce determination and decisiveness. The pulsating spirit guiding him served as his only illumination through the wood, as the moon overhead was blacked out by the overhang.

As he moved through the night, Subaru appeared to be calm on the outside, but inside he was a boiling inferno. His breathing was fierce and uneven. He had never once felt so filled with such silent rage before. Emilia being taken from him like this—he couldn't stand it. His mind, as fragile as it was, was slowly snapping. It was detaching and splintering from reality, like a needle piercing its way through the endless voids of time.

She was the only thing left in this world he held so dearly, and he would do *everything* in his power to make sure he wouldn't lose her too. And those who stood in his way? Simply put... *he would kill them all.*

Deep within him, he felt a mysterious energy swelling. It gave him *focus* and the will to act. He didn't quite know what it was, but it wasn't unwelcomed.

For too long, he had been weak; for too long, had he let those he loved to be hurt or even killed. He was powerless to stop the events which spiraled towards destruction right in front of him. Instead, he had to rely on others to support him, even though he wanted to be the one to make a difference. It was selfish, but he was tired of sitting by the wayside, watching others save him time and time again.

No longer would he fear death; no longer would he fear those who hunted him. No—*he* would be the one they would fear.

When he came into this world, he was nothing but a naive child, blind to the truth and reality that he was nothing but a *weakling*. And instead of facing his weaknesses, instead of detesting himself for what he was, he hid it behind a cushion of lies, as if he were hiding a rotting corpse. His shame was buried under the guise of a fool—and only now, he finally understood. It took a thousand deaths for him to realize it. There would be no more lies. No more deceit of the self. He fully understood his ineptitude, and because of it, he would rectify every error of his ways.

The little spirit in front of him paused, vibrated furiously, and then faded from sight. At this, Subaru knelt, careful not to alert anyone to his presence.

Up ahead, he could smell the faint scent of a burnt-out fire. There was a small clearing where the moon cut through like a knife, basking the area in a bluish light. Underneath the light, five individuals sleeping lay, soundly beneath the starry night sky.

Among them was the unmistakable sight of a silver-haired elf lying unconscious, her hair gleaming in the reflection of the moon.

"Emilia..." he whispered, his voice a feral growl.

He felt seething hatred take over every machination of his body. From his boot, he withdrew a dagger into his left hand, and carefully, he readied his sword with his right. Its blade shimmered brightly in the darkness. His face was in a snarl, and his teeth were gritted to a point where it was painful.

Carefully, he approached, so his footsteps elicited no sound. He was quiet, like a predator stalking its prey, ready to strike at any moment. As he took a step, ever so slowly, he felt something just barely brush over his foot, revealing itself as a small, thin wire to the corner of his eye. To the untrained eye, it was practically invisible in the shrouded darkness.

As he breathed a sigh of relief, he felt a bead of sweat tumble down his forehead. He made sure to wipe it away before it fell. Stepping silently into the camp, he approached one of the slumbering individuals. With his dagger in hand, it hovered near the unknowing man's neck. He made sure not to look at his face; he didn't want any regrets.

With one quick motion, he embedded the blade deep into his throat and tore it out. He felt warm blood splash against his face as his shocked victim awoke in terror, with death already kicking down his doorstep. Subaru held his hand over the man's mouth as the blood pooled from his neck, drowning himself in his own bodily fluid.

He struggled, but Subaru straddled him, so he couldn't draw any unwanted attention. With death already overtaking the man, his struggle was short-lived. Soon, his body fell limp, and his panicked eyes rolled back into his head.

Nonchalantly, he peered around the encampment. Nobody had noticed what he had just done.

That just left three more, but the other three were closer together, which would pose a problem. He decided he needed to act fast and brazen. The element of surprise was certainly an advantage here, but it could only get him so far.

Gripping both blades with fury, he leapt from the gurgling corpse, and with precision, he lodged the blood-stained dagger into another man's neck. He awoke with a shock and clawed madly at the blade stuck in his throat. Incapacitated, he would drown in his own blood as well.

As the panicked sounds of death rung throughout the night, the other two men finally stirred from their sleep. Leaping up, the brown-haired man grasped his sword lying next to him and readied himself.

The other wasn't so lucky. With speed, Subaru had already brought his sword down upon the man's collarbone as he reached for his weapon, cutting through his lungs and heart mercilessly. He fell to the ground, dead.

Subaru put his foot against the corpse and wedged his blade from it, spewing the area in blood. The other man spasmed violently, kicking and wailing with the dagger still stuck in his throat.

Readying himself, the brown-haired man brought his blade up just in time for the strike, parrying the blow from Subaru with great speed and agility. He recoiled, stumbled backward, and readied himself in a wild stance, with his sword hung overhead.

Subaru grimaced and stared the man down with all the hatred he could muster. The brown-haired man just gazed at him with a clear cool head. He furrowed his brow and nodded his head at the unconscious girl which still lay amongst the bloodbath of his friends.

"That elf-bitch is your girl, huh?" he said plainly, before continuing. "I can see why you're so

pissed. Believe me, I would be too if someone just kidnapped my girl as well."

Subaru said nothing in reply.

"Got nothing to say, huh? Well, let's get this over with, then."

Wordlessly Subaru lunged forward, blade in hand, and swung it clean from the side in an uppercut. His opponent parried him effortlessly, knocking him off balance. He could have struck him down, but he didn't.

"You fucking son of a bitch!" Subaru spit with malice and hatred. "Don't toy with me!"

He leapt forward again, this time from head on. His movements were easy to follow for the seasoned duelist, or for someone of Verizar's caliber. He smiled to himself and blocked the incoming jab. The blade passed harmlessly by him, and he thrust his shoulder into Subaru, shoving him to the ground.

Disarmed, Subaru lay there, helpless and exposed. Verizar's blade hovered just over his face, ready to end his life at any moment. But the blade did not fall, nor did it withdraw.

Subaru's breathing was heavy, his heart pounding violently against his chest, almost like it was going to burst. He felt like this before... always before he met the cold bitter end of death.

"You're beat, kid," Verizar said mockingly. "You might have got the drop on my friends, but you won't get the drop on me. You should have taken me out first, dumbass, if you wanted to play hero so badly."

His mind raced as he desperately looked for a way out. He couldn't cast any magic, as his gate was still wrecked beyond repair. He couldn't reach his sword. What then, could he do, except die?

As he eyed the blade which hovered tauntingly in front of him, he furrowed his brow. There was *one chance*... but he had to be quick. With great speed, he pushed himself off the ground and gripped the blade with all his might. It cut through his hand, but it caught Verizar off guard enough to surprise him.

Verizar pulled, attempting to withdraw the blade from Subaru's grasp, but his grip stood strong. Blood pooled down the edge of the blade and onto his pommel.

"The hell..." Verizar cursed in surprise.

Subaru pushed with all his might to throw his opponent onto his back, using his sword as a catalyst. His last-ditch effort was almost successful. To his surprise, Verizar dropped his sword to the ground, and as Subaru fell forward, he drew a small blade from his belt and stuck it into his back, right near the shoulder.

Subaru gasped at the sudden sharp pain and fell to the ground. He rolled over onto his side and gripped the blade and attempted to remove it, but it was wedged between the bone. Quickly, he scrambled, struggling to get to his feet. He limped backward as his assailant approached. Suddenly, the hunter became the hunted. In a gamble, he overplayed his hand, and he had lost.

His breathing was labored now, as he rasped for breath. His physicality was beginning to show its limit, no matter what obsession fueled him as it did. He was only human, after all.

Verizar scoffed at the pitiful sight in front of him. He almost felt bad for the kid. To come this far just to fail... that amused him more than anything else.

"You know, I have to give you credit," he said, raising his sword above for the final blow. "You lasted longer against me than most ever did, but now, the game has to come to an end."

Frozen in terror, Subaru was powerless to defend against the blow. Verizar brought his arm down.

The blade fell, but nothing struck Subaru.

In front of him, lay a golden aura of fire. It hovered brilliantly in front of him, guarding himself from the devastating killing blow with its burning blaze. Subaru looked around, confused as to what was happening.

"What in the hell?!" Verizar shrieked as he pulled back and looked around him. His eyes widened at what he saw. "That witch!"

Emilia stood there, her amethyst eyes glistening with tears of anger. Her hands were still bound behind her back, but that didn't keep her mouth from speaking a protective incantation. The air around them became dry, as all the moisture of the forest began to dissipate, evaporating in the presence of her power.

The heat in the air became so intense her bounds burnt to a crisp, finally freeing her hands. She outstretched her arm in the direction of Verizar, and fire combusted at the palm of her hand.

His eyes widened in shock, and from his pouch, he pulled a small grey ball. Immediately, he threw it against the ground, and the entire area went up in a grey smoke.

With the shield of fire still surrounding Subaru, Emilia raised both of her hands in the air and released a firewall which encompassed the entire camp, burning all in its path, including the grey smoke.

As the flame began to fade, she stumbled slightly, but was caught by Subaru. She had exhausted herself by conjuring such a power she couldn't even remember learning. Subaru looked around them. The man had obviously escaped. Only the charred remains of his companions remained.

The putrid smell of burnt flesh filled the air, and Subaru thought of nothing but to get away from here. "Emilia..." he spoke slowly, his pain slowing his ability to speak. "Let's go somewhere safe."

She looked at him with large tear-filled eyes and nodded solemnly. She couldn't look at him in the eye right now; she couldn't bear to see the pain.

He had gotten hurt because of *her*, yet again. Because of *her*, he had suffered.

With the knife still embedded in his back, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder to help her walk. Even though he probably was the one who needed more help walking than her, he still couldn't resist offering her his aid. Unwittingly, she accepted his help.

As the two slowly paced themselves away from the camp, Emilia looked back at the carnage they left in their wake. She saw the remains of the three bandits which just moments ago drew breaths of life. Never had she done something like this, not since...

"Don't look back there, Emilia," Subaru chided her, and with his bloodied fingers, he tenderly touched her cheek. "Just forget about it, okay? Just look at me, just think about us."

Her tear-speckled amethyst orbs locked eyes with his hazel ones, accidentally revealing herself to him, and he peered into her troubled soul. He saw the pain, the anger she felt... and the sadness.

He had to do *something*, but he knew only one way to comfort her, and that was with his love.

Only when he gripped her hand, and only then did she realize how hard she had been clinging to him. His lips pressed against her own and his blood and dirt covered hand cupped her cheek with gentility. And only then did her tears fall from her stricken eyes, and with it, he felt every ounce of feeling pouring from her soft lips: the urgency of her kiss, the occasional bite of the lip, her passion as she pressed against him—even as a knife still jutted violently from his back.

He didn't care. The only person, the only thing which mattered was the girl who needed him so badly as she did. There was no pain, there was no sorrow—it was gone as soon as they came together as one.

And he conveyed this to her with his touch and with his undying need. He told her how he would give his life for her own, he told her not to worry about his wounds, he told her the world did not matter when it meant her safety. No word needed be said, as it was all expressed so thoroughly in their mesmerizing ritual.

When they came back to reality that night, the two had made their way down to a shallow creek which cut the forest in two.

Emilia washed his wounds as best she could and superheated the blade which was stuck inside him. It was painful, but it was necessary to remove it. Subaru did not cry out in agony, nor did he whine. He let her work, and soon, he felt the warmth of her healing magic which soothed him from head to toe. His body ached for sleep, and for recovery. Even with her skills, he could still feel the side effects of such devastation to his body, mentally and physically.

Later, after it was all said and done, the two took to the road. Subaru told her about Puck and what had happened. If not for him, he would not have found her as he did. He owed him a great debt of gratitude. She told him she knew he hadn't left her, and she knew he would guide him to her. That was the kind of protective spirit he was.

Come morning, the pair took up the main road for a change and continued up north toward Priestella. The two were careful to hide their identity to any oncoming traveler, trying their best to avoid attention.

The further they traveled, the colder it got. In the evening, they camped by the side of the road in a small gully. Behind them rest a tree line which cut back into a winding forest they had no interest in traversing. The two hadn't shared much in conversation; instead, they just enjoyed their time together without much going on.

Even still, the memory of the burning village of Nicia and the mystery which surrounded it still beckoned him in the back of his mind like a bad headache. The cursed woods was another point of question for him. Who knew if those two events are connected? Even now, he guessed it didn't matter. Such events like those were out of his hands in the first place. He tried to push the thought of it away as best he could, but to no avail as he was unsuccessful.

They were near the crossroads which lead west to Priestella now, a prime trade route which housed a small outpost full of city officials and management. If they were to pass through there, they would have to be careful and seldom talk to anyone. Emilia had suggested they make a roundabout and avoid the crossroad, but Subaru didn't want to risk any more violent confrontation for the time being.

While Subaru heard the trotting steps of ground-dragons pass by, he noticed Emilia struggling to light a fire with her fingertips. She furrowed her brow in a pout, clearly beside herself. It was

freezing outside, and they could *really* use a fire. She snapped her fingers together, over and over just like she had done so many times before, but no fire came. She let out an angry huff. The increasingly cool air required a warm fire to be acceptable at best.

"I don't understand!" she whined, continuing to snap her fingers together. "It may be my gate is worn out from yesterday?"

"It could be possible," Subaru said, withdrawing some flint and tinder from his pack. "Guess we can settle for the old-fashioned way, though." He took a steel piece and worked it against the flint, over and over, until small sparks lit the dry wood just a little bit. "Once there's a small flame, blow just like this." He cupped his hands, and with precision, he blew just gently on the smoldering tinder. It smoked and spread throughout the wood. Within moments, a small fire had erected.

"Thank you!" Emilia clapped excitedly, adding more dry tinder and stoking the flame.

"Nothing to it..." Subaru brushed off her praise but gave her a small wink in return.

Even though he was almost certain she knew how to start a fire without magic, he was just trying to humor her and make light about her loss of magical prowess. It would be a damning thing for her gate to be damaged beyond recognition. Her magic was a powerful asset, not to just her, but to him as well. Without Puck, and a damaged gate, it would be almost impossible for her to cast any sort of magic, and by god he knew her powers were important. She needed a means to defend herself, and her magic certainly provided that defense.

As they sat around the campfire, the two had relaxed comfortably into the arms of one another. After some time had past, a growing noise echoed in the pale gloom of the young night. Soon, that echo turned to a roaring thunder, almost akin to a small earthquake, and Subaru looked over to see what the noise was.

A small band of about a dozen merchants and their three ground-dragons made their way down the dusty road toward the outpost. Subaru noticed they were in quite a rush, as the ground-dragons were clearly tired from a long journey. Their deep and repetitive breaths were clearly visible in smoky puffs through the cold air.

Emilia and Subaru both watched the outpost gates swing open without warning, obviously receptive of the merchant's arrival. The merchants chatted with the guards for a minute. A few choice words were exchanged, because he could hear some shouting and other fuss come from their direction. They finished their terse exchange soon enough, and they disappeared within the confines of the outpost's walls.

"We need to get in there somehow," Subaru said to Emilia, as he poked at the fire. "But how?"

Emilia thought for a moment, before responding. "Well, perhaps we can pose as a merchant?"

It was a typical idea, almost too simple to work. They didn't look like merchants: a half-elf and a man with no goods to peddle. *Yeah, we really looked like merchants*, Subaru thought sarcastically. "No, that wouldn't work," he then said, scratching the scruff of his growing beard. "But we could sneak in with one of the merchant patrols who comes through here."

"That's a good idea!" Emilia responded positively. Truly, it wouldn't be very difficult to accomplish.

"Hopefully they have a tavern there," Subaru stood up, rubbing his starved stomach. "I could use a hot meal and a belly full of fresh mead to ease my mind." He didn't think himself a drunk, but he

certainly wouldn't mind *being* drunk for a change. It would take his mind off things for a bit; loosen up, that sort of thing.

"*Mhmm—!*" she replied with an agreeable moan.

From the distance, Subaru could see another small company of merchants approaching, this time with four ground-dragon caravans transporting goods to Priestella. *Perfect opportunity*, he thought.

Subaru kicked dirt over the fire to quickly put it out and picked up his sword and belongings. Emilia followed suit and the two scrambled up the ravine just off the road. They laid prone in wait for the caravans to pass by.

"Just follow me, okay?" he asked, holding her hand tight.

Emilia nodded in response, and swallowed in preparation.

The ground began to shake as the dragons approached closer and closer. The two watched as they began to pass by them. They would do best to take the final caravan in the back to avoid suspicion.

"Now—!" he cued.

As the final caravan approached, the two jumped up quickly. Subaru took Emilia in his arms and threw her into the back of the caravan, and just barely hung onto the back of it. He almost fell, as it was travelling at quite a fast speed, but Emilia helped him up into the cart.

Now, they lay in the back of the transport, undiscovered and on a free ride to the outpost. The caravan shook as it traveled along the road. It was a bumpy ride in the back of a dragon-drawn caravan, as he had once experienced before. But it was no matter; Subaru couldn't complain about their current situation. Everything was going according to plan.

"Well, that couldn't have gone any better," he said. It went almost *too* well. Nothing ever went well for him, did it?

"Certainly!" she said excitedly.

The caravan came to a sudden halt, as it began to pass through the gate now, and it swung open just like before. One by one they passed through, and as it came to their turn, he could hear the gate guards exchange a few words with the operator of the ground-dragon.

"What goods are you transporting to Priestella?" the guard asked, as he looked suspiciously at the caravan.

"Armaments and war-time supplies for the guard, sir," the driver replied, somewhat nervously at that.

The guard was clearly growing impatient with the driver of the carriage. "Do you consent to a search of your goods and properties?" he said, a clear annoyance evident in his tone.

"Oh, shit," Subaru cursed to himself. "Not good."

Emilia covered her mouth with her palm in shock.

"No, I do not, *sir*," the driver replied. "I can assure you my goods are completely legal and of the highest quality."

"Pass on through then," the guard finally said, albeit begrudgingly. "Be on your way."

Both Subaru and Emilia breathed a deep sigh of relief. They were about to be had in the most pathetic way possible. The two kept quiet as the convoy passed into the outpost. In silence, they carefully planned when they would make their escape out into the town.

As the caravan made a turn out of sight from the gate-guards, the pair silently slipped out of the caravan and made their way off the road to avoid detection.

Inside the outpost was nothing truly interesting. It served its purpose: to be a trade route between the south cities and the north cities—and for that, it worked out perfectly. Trade routes such as these were popular for government officials to inhabit, so they could properly enforce their trade tax which gave financial support to the main cities. Such a tax was a trifling matter indeed when considering that most lesser villages had no governmental support or protection.

There were a few buildings to be seen: shops, houses, along with what looked to be a shanty tavern to house wary travelers. Merchants were going in and out of it quite rapidly, so clearly it was a popular area.

Nobody questioned the two as they made their way to the entrance. Emilia kept her hood over her ears to hide her identity as a half-elf, and Subaru kept calmly to himself. In fact, they blended quite well among the populace.

Subaru rolled the sliding door back and looked around the nameless tavern. A familiar sight: human, demi-human, merchants, guards, vagabonds, and the like all sharing in the comfort of a warm watering hole. This tavern even had an entourage playing a few merry songs on their lutes and drums. It was a welcome sight to behold.

Emilia smiled brightly to Subaru, and he returned the gesture.

It was areas such as these which took the weight of the world off his shoulder. It was nice to come here to enjoy a hot meal, forget the world's troubles and drink all his problems away. In a world like this, who couldn't resist doing that?

Subaru felt his stomach release an angry growl. Emilia stifled a laugh in response to it, much to his embarrassment. Not that she wasn't starving herself, that was. Even so, it was high time they sat down for some dinner, or they at least needed to get something in their stomachs.

The two sat down at an empty table, and Subaru motioned for the bar-lady to bring them something to eat. She nodded shyly and quickly returned with two mugs of mead and the special of the day, which was some type of mashup of potatoes and soup. Subaru flipped her a gold piece in a kind gesture of gratitude and dug into his plate.

Emilia chuckled at her starving partner. If they could go more than a day without missing a meal, that would be just amazing. It felt like every time they went out into the wild, it would be days before they could find food or water. It was a poor habit, that's for sure.

As Subaru sipped from his mug of mead, he felt the warmth of the liquor sting his throat, but a hot sensation tingled in his belly. Simply put, it felt wonderful. After a few more sips from his mug, the effects of the drink began to take over him. This was a drink which got better after every taste.

He eyed his female partner across from him, who happily sipped from her mug as well. She looked at him with a curious glint in her eye. She was mischievous, for sure.

Subaru hoped things between them would begin to settle down. He enjoyed his budding relationship with Emilia more than anything in the world, but there was such a tension between the

two he could barely stand it. It took every ounce of his will to keep him from jumping on her right here and now in front of everyone.

Eventually... *That might end badly*, he figured. To be sure, once they got some free time to settle down and rest, he would talk about what happened over the past few days with Emilia. They hadn't had the time to sit down and chat about it like a normal couple. No, they didn't have time for that. Even as they endured such devastating and draining events as they did, there still wasn't proper time to sit down and just *talk*. At least they had time to express things, *physically*.

Subaru felt a blush spread across his cheeks at his remembrance of such things.

Taking note of this, his partner in crime across the table eyed him carefully. She playfully smirked at him and sipped from her mead innocently, as if nothing in the world was bothering her.

She was almost just as conflicted as he was. All the anger she had felt towards those bandits who kidnapped her, who hurt Subaru... and what she had done, it was all too much for her to comprehend now. It was because of that she had almost blocked the event out entirely, forgetting about it for the moment. Even so, it was there at the back of her mind, nagging at her, as such things always did.

After a few mugs of mead and another bowl of soup, Subaru found himself dancing with the patrons of the bar. The music was festive and merry, and he just couldn't keep himself from joining in all of the fun. Well, to be honest, he didn't even realize how he became a part of this in the first place.

All he knew is he held Emilia tightly against him, her cheeks too buzzing with a reddish hue, clearly under the influence of whatever they just drank. One step there, another here—it was all a blur.

He didn't even realize when her hood had fallen off and her pointy ears were exposed for all the world to see. Luckily enough for the pair, the merry patrons of the bar were too far drunk and preoccupied in the festivities to notice. And so, they danced, danced, and danced some more until the sun had long since set in the west and the moon rose to take its place.

Eventually the patrons of the tavern began to recede to the comfort of their beds, and with that, the dancing and merry games ceased. But the effects of the night had long since taken hold.

Emilia gave Subaru a wry smile, and he gave her somewhat of a wistful gaze. Her eyes were dilated and inquisitive. Time passed slowly; the whole world was forgotten except for the single girl he kept so close to his heart. He didn't know where they went, or where they were going, but he didn't care. Somehow, the two found themselves in a warm, low-lit room. As they shut the door behind them, they stumbled to remove their clothes and fumbled onto the bed. To Subaru's surprise, by some god somewhere, they made it without falling to the floor.

The shock of the events which played out the night before were lost to them now, their lives nothing but a warm haze of love and happiness. He felt a burning sensation pull at him, beckoning to his heightened senses... or lack thereof. Emilia, ever the one to please, noticed this, and with all the allure of a goddess, she revealed herself to him.

Subaru hesitated, his mouth agape at the scenery of her silky-smooth alabaster skin. Ever so tantalizing to touch, and even more so to taste. He dragged his mouth across her collarbone, and to her neck, leaving small bites in his wake. She moaned and pressed against him in response.

At the top of the window, the moon spilt through brilliantly, illuminating their small room in a

mystical cast of pale light. Her vibrant amethyst eyes were darker than he had ever seen them before. They spoke to him as he gazed longingly into them, and very clearly, he heard the forbidden words even though her mouth remained still:

"I want you..."

No part of him dared to protest the silent plea she gave him.

Drawing his hands over the smooth contours of her body, Subaru could feel her shallow breath and the deepening flush which graced her pale skin. While he memorized her in the light of the moon, he tenderly touched her cheek with his palm. She turned her face inward into his palm and kissed him, savoring his taste as she worked her way around his hand. As she had done so, he removed the final remnants of her clothing and cupped her breast as they finally revealed themselves. She moaned and tore at his own clothing, her nails leaving marks across his skin as they glided over him with surgical precision.

She needed him, and he her, and soon she lay over him, naked and wanting, and he obliged her. She felt all of him, and they rocked against each other with all the rhythm of a clear blue stream. As he thrust into her, he felt her need, all her want. He could feel the sadness, the pain, the suffering, but they paled in comparison to her happiness, the vastness of her peace. This was the perfect moment. He reached out to touch her deeper, as far as he could...

She climaxed for the first time, and she whispered his name over and over into his ear like a forbidden mantra. The pleasure which pierced her mind silenced her thoughts, cleared her of all unwanted emotion. There was only Subaru, and no one else.

As she finished, Subaru began to pace himself quicker and quicker, and he began to lose himself in the pleasures of her sex. Soon enough, he felt his own climax. His was powerful, and a much-needed release into oblivion. His body went limp against her own, and she pulled him deep against her, never going to let go.

He heard her sweet singing voice whisper things into his ear, things which were forever lost to him, as all words and syllables of the world were now just a vague idea. He couldn't process anything tangible, but he could still hear her soft angelic voice which lulled him into a deep and emotional trance.

Slowly, she moved out from underneath him, his body still limp against her own. He did not fight back, nor did he try to keep her from going. He just lay there, not abashed, but lost to the world and its intricacies.

All he saw was Emilia, and as she drew circles on his back and covered him in small kisses of love and comfort, his love for her grew tenfold. Soon, his eyes shut, and he rolled comfortably on his side. She cocooned herself against his unmoving body, caressing him with an everlasting love.

As he drifted in and out of sleep, he could hear her soft voice sing to him all throughout the night.

The Jealous Shadow and Her Love

Subaru woke up gasping, clutching his chest and heaving over his blankets, struggling to breathe. Flailing on the bed, he felt as if his very life force siphoned away by something invisible.

It was a familiar feeling he thought had gone forever.

Blackness—it was all he saw now. Soon enough, he was in the depths of his own mind. There was no semblance of direction, time, or anything else Subaru could identify. It was a world deeper inside him than even his own subconscious, locked away from all interference from the rest of existence. In this desolate world, he saw nothing, and even deeper within, he saw shadows within the nothingness.

It was vague, but he could trace the outline of *something*, hiding shyly behind a miasma of envy, love and despair. Then, a small but unmistakable voice escaped through the chasm of nothingness, reaching his deafened ears. It was staggered and faint, but clear enough to understand:

"My love for thee is everlasting..."

It was strange; the voice itself was familiar, but the words of love were not, spoken by a ventriloquist-controlled puppet of someone very close to him. The admission of love fell on deaf ears—soon, there was silence again.

A brief pause followed, then he heard the uncanny voice once more, but this time it was more clear:

"Why didst thou separate from me?" said the nameless shadow as it lay hidden. "Wherefore...? My love goest unrequited, and I only suspect thou hast abandoned me. Why didst thou hide thyself under pretense, as if thee held no love for me at all?"

The unacquainted, yet still-familiar voice echoed throughout the black corridors of the surrounding invisible walls. Her voice was a mixture of emotions, both sad and apologetic, but he could feel a tinge of anger... or perhaps *distrust* emanating from it.

The figure vibrated and stirred furiously in the darkness. "I loveth thee... I loveth thee... I loveth thee!" she sung passionately with a rising tenor. "Wilt you find it within thy heart to requite such feelings? 'Tis a loneliness which I shan't banish within myself, until I hath thy heart full and true—henceforth, nothing may prorogue it."

He floated toward the soft chime which beckoned him like only one other person could. Even if the way the words were spoken was different, the voice itself was unmistakable. It was a voice just as foreign and as familiar as his own.

It could have been no one else.

"Emilia...?" Subaru called out to the sea of black.

Abruptly, he felt something grip his throat. It was that welcoming suffocating feeling he received every time he threatened to break the rules of his Return by Death.

He clawed frantically at his neck as it tightened further, forcing his eyes to roll back into his head. With death knocking, he grasped the invisible arms sucking the life from his body. He tried to uselessly peel the immeasurably strong fingers from his throat. The vessels in his eyes finally

popped from the stress, painting his eyes blood red. Madly, he kicked, flailing helplessly as he began to lose consciousness, but the firm grip of the shadows still held strong.

"Stop... please..." Subaru begged, as his raspy, strained voice barely escaped his ensnared throat.

The grip loosened, and the silhouette behind the shadow slowly came into view, revealing herself to him. His bloodshot eyes widened, and he sucked in a vital breath of air no sooner before gasping it out in shock.

There, a thin woman who appeared no older than he himself exposed herself.

Her dress—malformed from the blanketing shadows surrounding them—pulsated around her. It reminded him of heartbeats, its rhythm stricken and pained from loss. Silver flowing hair dangled long past her shoulders, and solemn tears dripped steadily from her amethyst eyes. Her glowing pale skin which threatened to blind him, contrasted heavily with the pitch black which surround them.

Even so, although she was threatening to strangle his life away just moments ago, her plush cheeks were painted with a rosy red color, signifying she was either shy, anxious or embarrassed... or something else unimaginable, to say the least.

Yes—this unique, unquestionable face of beauty belonged to one person dear to him, and one person alone. It was that of the girl whom he depended on so dearly, the one whom he made love to just hours prior. Yet, something was different about her. Her face bore an expression so dismal and filled with sadness it rivalled even his darkest moments. Gone was the cheery face of the one he held so close to his heart, replaced by someone who had clearly been through much despair.

The maiden glowered and looked upon him with tear laden eyes. "Prithee, call upon my true name," she said as her voice quivered, tinged with heartbreak. "Tis been many a year mine own name hast gone without utterance, and I may hast yet forgotten the tune of it. If thou truly knowest, then I beseech thee to allow mine own ears to hear it anew."

Her pure voice rung throughout his head, pulling him back to a moment long past.

They were standing on the balcony overlooking the slums of Lugnica. The half-elf dangled playfully over the railing, her hair flowing gracefully in the steady wind. She effortlessly painted the skyline with her beauty. Without her, this moment would be nothing. With her, any moment was of such great consequence he could remember every detail, down to the cracks in the bricks beneath them. As he stood there silently, all he could think about was her intoxicating potent smell of jasmine, and the sheer impossibility of her loveliness.

He spoke his request, and she turned to him slowly.

"*Satella...*" the half-elf introduced herself, her emotions unrecognizable apart from a mild hesitation in her voice. "*I don't have a last name, so you can just call me Satella.*"

Her spirit cat hovered quietly over her shoulder, watching her movements closely. There was a long pause in speech, as the two parties stared at each other without a word to exchange. The red-sun winds blew heartily in the tepid Lugnican air, capturing the half-elf's hair marvelously in its grasp.

Suddenly, the sprawling city skyline warped harshly, and twisted into darkness until it was no more.

His eyes opened, and he again stood face to face with the reason of his existence.

Her piercing aquamarine pupils bore deep into his own bloodied eyes. She was only inches from him now. He could smell the heady scent of rich jasmine, something he had become quite accustomed to. She was as alluring and tantalizing as ever, something he could just reach out and touch without a moment of thought.

Instead, she reached out with one frail hand to finally touch him. After all this time, one touch is all she ever wanted. He flinched as her fingers brushed gently over his cheek, as they were cold and clammy—probably from something akin to nervousness... or fright.

Was she afraid of him?

Don't be afraid, he thought.

Slowly, he reached up and brushed his own hand over her own, squeezing it with both care and comfort. Her soft eyes burst wide open as tears began to brim the corners, threatening to fall without a moments notice. Abruptly, she pulled back, and with great worry he reached out to her—but he was too late.

He heard a deafening sound, and he was wrenched from the depths of the darkness within his own mind.

Subaru shot up from his bed, beads of sweat brimming his forehead. Panicked, he looked around the cabin, gasping for breath. He was alone. Shakily, his hand reached up to touch his cheek, where her little hand had just rested seconds ago. It was still warm from the close contact.

The spot next to him where his lover lay was cold and empty. It was unusual for her to leave his side, especially as he slept. It was still dusk outside, probably just before sunrise.

Subaru dressed himself, stood and walked over to the desk where Emilia's belongings lay just the night before. Of course, they were gone, and with no explanation or a letter to write why or where she had fled to.

Suddenly, Subaru could hear the rusted doorknob jiggle behind him. He turned to face it as the door slowly propped itself open, revealing the girl of his worry.

Emilia looked at him with surprise, as if she had been caught in the middle of an act. Unusually, she was dressed in her original white garb, along with her magical pointy eared cloak. Her eyes blinked at him inquisitively, wondering if he would speak. Her large amethyst eyes were a deep purple color, and just so, so beautiful.

Never mind that, he thought. Sometimes it was a struggle to think clearly and consistently regarding her. "Emilia..." he called, as he walked over to her and held the door for her. "What are you doing out so early in the morning? I was worried for a moment... are you—"

"I was just out for a walk," she explained, her voice curt as she cut him off. She walked inside with soft footsteps and passed him to stand near the foot of the bed. "Last night, I was feeling uncomfortable for some reason. So, whilst the moon was bright and the air was cool and agreeable, I stepped out to talk with the lesser spirits. Normally, I communicated with them every day... and 'tis been almost four days since my last meeting with them. They had... *a lot* to share with me."

Subaru kept quiet. Her voice was soft and unsure, like she had done something wrong. She hadn't, of course. She looked at him plainly now, her doe eyes widened but filled with caution. Slowly, he reached out his hand to touch hers—

A blood-curdling scream jolted Emilia from her haze. Unsure of what to do, she jumped back as

Subaru fell chaotically to the ground. He was flailing wildly on the ground, seemingly assailed by something invisible.

"*Subaru—!*" she shrieked, before finally rushing over to kneel beside him. "Subaru, please what is it? Please tell me what's wrong!" Panicked, she pressed her hands against him and began a healing incantation.

He was pale as snow, heaving and unable to speak from the amount of pain he was experiencing. It felt as if his heart was being squashed between two powerful hands. Suddenly, the pressure released itself, and the world came back into focus.

He stood hastily and crawled over to the corner of the room, hiding his pained face from Emilia. She stared at him with confusion, the shock on her face easy for anyone to see.

"Em-Emilia..." he coughed, his mouth filling with the taste of blood. "Stay away from me... please. Just... get away from me, now!"

While breathing haggardly, he hoisted himself up. He stumbled and tripped over his own feet in a hurry and raced madly out the door without any explanation or recourse for the silver-haired half-elf he left behind. She just watched him leave without any interference.

As the door hung open, other patrons of the inn stood outside, wondering what all the fuss was about. They talked curiously amongst themselves, paying no attention to the small, frail girl left alone in the room.

Splayed out, she rested on her knees, shaking from the unexpectedness of it all. Hot tears streamed steadily down her cheeks, with no sign of ending.

"Subaru..." Emilia said, her voice a panicked cry. Now she was sobbing uncontrollably, and with nobody to comfort her. "Please, come back..."

There was no response, and she was met with only silence and the sounds of her own convulsions. Soon, her cries ceased, and with it, her sadness was replaced with a growing realization. After a moment, a frightened and desperate voice went unnoticed amongst the crowd:

"Don't leave me..."

"I have no one else."

"...Subaru?"

"You promised you wouldn't leave me, ever."

"...Subaru, you liar."

* * *

Subaru fell on his hands and knees. Gasping for breath, he stared at his barely-visible reflection in the murky puddle beneath him.

He looked like death... or someone close to it. His eyes had sagging dark bags underneath them, and his face appeared as if it had aged considerably. He gave out and splashed down on his back, his chest rising and falling with a staggered lurch. His pained heart beat profusely, about to burst through his ribcage.

"Ah..." he breathed out, as he tried to slow the panicked rise and fall of his chest. It had little effect, and his chest pains continued mercilessly.

Rolling over onto his side and propping himself up, Subaru looked around him. He had run as far

as he could, straight through the forest where they came from. He had one destination in mind, a place where he had to get to, even if it meant his life. He didn't know *why* he wanted to go back there, but he just felt like he *needed* to.

So, on he marched quietly, through crooks and crags, rivers and woods—he just kept walking himself to death.

He felt like he wanted to die anyway, so that would only be a plus. He understood his death was inevitable, as this world he had so recently arrived in has given him nothing *but* death, but denying him the sweetest nothing at the end of it all. Now, he couldn't even be close to the last person who mattered to him in this evil world. All that's left was the fading of people who had met their bloody end before himself.

No, that was wrong. He had died a thousand times before—what difference would one last time make? Their memories weren't fading either. He was lying to himself if he said that. Their faces were burned into his mind unlike anything else—their bloodied corpses and the death rattles they let out in their final moments... he could remember every detail which was burnt so deeply into his mind. Petra... Frederica... Beatrice... and—

He ceased his movements as his eyes widened in sorrow. He fell quietly to his knees as moonlight shone through two hazy clouds overhead. In front of him was the courtyard of Roswaal's now empty mansion; a place of his nightmares... and of his dreams. He could remember every wonderful moment spent here with Emilia, with Rem, Ram, and everyone else. He could also remember every painful death he had experienced here, and every horrid nightmare he had experienced here.

As he looked around, he noticed the normal lush green color of the courtyard had turned a dull brown, a sign the area had once been frozen over. Perhaps it was from the wicked magister's ice storm, perhaps not.

He could feel a cold chill overtake his body, as he remembered what catastrophe occurred here. In the left center of the vast courtyard lay two makeshift grave-markers—the final resting place of Petra and Frederica. He had buried them after Elsa and her little accomplice murdered them. That assassin was no doubt still alive, as she had let him live just for him to persist in this tormented world forever.

He slowly crept up to the graves and stared down at them blankly. He was silent, unmoving—inhumanly so. He dared not make a sound. He just walked past the graves and into the main entrance of the mansion, now convinced of what he had to do.

The main doorway was pushed open, revealing a mansion that was empty, just like the rest of his world. It was eerie how the mansion was so still, so vast as it was, yet so empty and alone. It was the perfect allegory for Subaru's life, its lifelessness and emptiness rivaling even his own.

He withdrew his sword from its sheath, its blade glimmering under the moon's glowing illumination. It was a fine blade indeed, sharp enough to cut through any material—certainly enough to cut through his own flesh like a hot knife slicing its way through butter. He knelt to one knee and placed the pommel of the blade against the ground, pointing the tip directly at his throat. It inched closer, and closer, until he could feel it hovering close enough to make his forehead sweat.

Once before, he had done something like this... for the sake of someone close to him. Now, it was for entirely different reasons.

He closed his eyes, swallowed his fear, took a deep breath and—

"—*Subaru!*"

A bell toll of a voice echoed through the hallways, wresting him from his determination.

The blade clattered to the ground, rattling and sending piercing echoes throughout the endless corridors of the mansion. It finally rested, and with it came a silence unlike any other.

He wouldn't move, not even the slightest. His tongue was caught in his throat, and his mouth dried up so fast he didn't think he could ever speak. He just knelt there, as the pitter-patter of gentle footsteps came closer and closer to him. He couldn't turn around, nor could he face her—not now, right at the end. He knew his betrayal ran deeper than she could ever understand. After all, he had betrayed himself more than anyone. He wasn't a hero, but a coward—a spineless, weak, pathetic coward, one who ran away from his problems instead of facing them. With his back against a wall, he had finally given up, completely, and utterly.

The soft footsteps ceased.

"Subaru..." Emilia's voice was almost a whimper. "I... I..." Her voice faltered, as she was just as unable to speak as he.

Ironically, both of their inadequacies matched each other perfectly right now. Admittedly, it was in these inadequacies they found solace in each other. In all their imperfections, they could find perfection.

"You shouldn't have followed me..." Subaru criticized, his voice so quiet it was almost inaudible. "Why did you come?"

"You are a liar, Subaru," she accused pointedly. The devastating words came out in quick bursts, like she couldn't control herself. "You said you would never leave me!"

Subaru's body jerked violently in reaction to these words. "It's not my fault!" he denied darkly, burying his face in his hands. "I swear, it's not my fault..." His voice then dropped to a volume which reached no human nor half-elf ears:

"...It's the *you* inside me."

She stood behind him, her glistening amethyst eyes brimming with tears. Fear was stricken across her face. It pained him to the core, the very center of his being, and it tore him apart to hear her speak such things. He didn't want to be here right now—in fact, he wanted to be *dead*.

"I swear, I can't do this anymore," he promised, speaking to nobody but himself. His voice continued to rise with every syllable, until it was almost a shout. "I can't go on, and if I can't be with you, I don't want to breathe anymore!"

His hand reached for the sword on the ground. He heard a panicked shriek behind him, and as he clasped it, another hand slapped his own, pinning it to the ground. Her other arm wrapped possessively around him, pulling him tightly against her soft chest.

"Please, don't—!" Emilia screamed in desperation. It was a plea for his life. "Please, no! Please don't leave me! I need you! I don't want to be alone. Don't leave me behind. Stay with me!"

Her vice-like grip around him tightened, and he gave up struggling against her will. He couldn't fight against her. Anyone but her.

Suddenly, her demeanor did a complete opposite turn. He could feel her hot breath tickling him softly on the back of his neck, and her unique sweet succulent smell was heady. Quickly, he was becoming ever so intoxicated, finding himself under her magical spell yet again.

"Come here, my love," she whispered into his ear, nuzzling him with her rosy cheek. "My lovely Subaru... touch me like you touched me the night before. I will let you touch me anytime or anywhere—my body is yours."

Subaru let out an unexpected sigh of relief. Something wonderful was calming him, and it felt like magic. Truthfully, he knew what this intoxicating feeling was. It was *her* magic, the magic he felt every time he looked at her... but something was different this time.

"I'm so happy when I'm with you, Subaru. Remember when you came to see me in the tomb? I was *sooo* tired from attempting the trial, and then you came to see me. I told you the truth then. I am so scared without you. I absolutely *must* have you. I need you more than *anything*."

Her voice was so full of emotion. But just like that one fateful night, her words still felt hollow for some reason, as if they weren't her own. So, whose were they?

By this point, she had pressed her entire body against his. As she gripped his hand and led it to the top of her hair, Subaru did not fight back or struggle.

"Don't you love touching my hair, Subaru?" Emilia asked, letting out a giggle as she had done so. "You can touch me anytime now, I promise. In fact, I *reeeally* want you to touch me!"

By now, she was stroking her silken hair with his own hand. He was lifeless in her arms, almost like a ragdoll; for some reason, he just couldn't move. She kept whispering her sweet nothings into his ear, and he kept listening to her silently.

Even so, nothing she said was really ringing any bells within him.

It was then Subaru came to a sudden realization. Maybe, just *maybe*, Emilia was worse off than he thought. Maybe, she needed more real comfort than even himself. All this time, he had been worried about himself, selfish as he always was. He hadn't changed, and this cruel world he was stuck in didn't make his selfish desires any less apparent. He had to fix this, somehow, even if it risked his own life interacting with her.

"Emilia..." Subaru whispered to her, but she didn't notice.

A cute smile graced her pretty face, and she said, "Hey, Subaru, we are all alone now. Nobody else is here. It's just you and me, remember? Puck isn't here anymore... Roswaal isn't here anymore... Rem and Ram, they are gone too. I'm yours now..."

"That's enough, Emilia..." Subaru's voice was barely audible and fell on deaf ears once more.

"...And the royal selection; you don't have to worry about that too, remember? We can just run away from Lugnica. Away from all the danger. We can have our own adventures together, just you and me. You can take care of me like you always wanted to! You have my full attention now, Subaru..."

"I said that's enough..." Subaru shut his eyes and tightened his grip on her hand, but she was in her own world.

"Don't you want to take care of me? I want you to save me, like you saved me before time after time. Just don't get hurt, okay? We've been hurt enough. It's time for us to relax and forget about all

the hurt."

Suddenly, Subaru felt a sharp pain invite itself into his head, and then an androgynous voice echoed through his skull:

"Make Lia stop, Subaru... I beg you!"

Subaru clenched his fists, his body shook, and his shoulders hunched over.

"I said enough!" he roared, his voice booming.

His rage snapped Emilia from whatever self-induced trance she had locked herself in. She shuddered at the cruelty of his voice and cowered away from him, but she couldn't get far. His grip on her was too strong for her to overcome. Every time she tried to pull away, he jerked her in to make sure she wouldn't escape.

"You're hurting me," Emilia whimpered, an unmistakable fear laden in her voice. "Subaru... why?"

He blinked his eyes at the small and frail girl who lay before him. Tears were threatening to fall from her beautiful amethyst eyes any moment now. She appeared frightened of *him*. Of all people, she was fearful of *him*.

Turning his head away, he uttered quietly to himself, "I'm despicable..."

Dejected as he was, his grip on her loosened, and stared blankly past her, unable to maintain eye contact any longer.

Even if he didn't see it, Emilia stared questioningly at his lonesome form.

She had been taken aback by Subaru's words and actions. Of course, she wasn't entirely in the right state of mind either. Even still, this girl, afraid and alone in this world just as much as he, had given herself completely to him, both physically and emotionally. He had misunderstood it. For sure, it was something he couldn't quite completely fathom. Before, he mistook her obsessiveness over him to be something other than her own normal self: a state of mind orchestrated by that evil magicians' manipulations. He told himself that, to rationalize it. He didn't believe anyone could love him like that.

He remembered Rem's declaration of love to himself, a moment etched to his very soul. It was eerily similar—representing a love he could not completely understand, and so it made him afraid, fearful even.

This time, he wouldn't make that same mistake again.

They were both crying now. Oh, how it became so routine for them to cry in some way shape or form. He was tired of crying, as was she. It was a symptom of something far more distressing than just sadness, as its freshness was becoming dull, like a rusted blade left out to rot in the rain and sun. After a moment, he picked up her weightless body and carried her up the main staircase. She did not struggle, nor did she make a sound other than a few whimpers as she wept.

The signs of carnage which took place here remained, unchanged by the ravages of time. Subaru did his best to avoid the worst areas such as the dining room. He wouldn't go back there again. Interestingly, it had only been a few days since then. Even under his oath that he would never return here, he found himself right back in this wretched place once again.

Long would it be, before the sun finally arose, and he knew of one room left untouched to the

massacre which took place here.

Holding Emilia deftly in one arm, he maneuvered the jewel adorned doorknob with his free hand. Slowly, the door crept open, revealing a master bedroom large enough and fit for a queen. It was Emilia's old bedroom, locked away from the events which shook everything inhabiting this very mansion.

He set her down carefully onto the well-acquainted bed. Moonlight cascaded through the large windows, filling the room with a hazy glow. Subaru reached under and brought the silk covers up over her in a small gesture of kindness. No doubt this one intricately-designed room cost a small fortune, a sign of the Mathers' infinite wealth. It was no doubt fit for royalty.

Emilia was wordless as he continued his movements. By now, the last of her tears had finally fallen, and the shock of his rejection passed over her like leaves falling lazily from a tree. She blanketed him with a suspicious gaze in return for his efforts.

Not even moments ago, he was about to end his life, and his aggressive behavior was nothing short of surprising to her. Something was *wrong* with Subaru, but she didn't know what. There were many times before, when she could see the suffering written on his face, but even still he could not tell her what was bothering him. Maybe, just maybe, she could finally get some answers now.

As one of his tears fell somberly to her lap, gentle fingers wrapped around his own. Emilia tilted her head at Subaru questioningly and said:

"Subaru, can you tell me what's wrong?" Her voice was soft, and full of worry.

He stared miserably at the tiny, warm hand wrapped around his own lifeless and unmoving digits. He frowned and shook his head negatively.

She nudged her curious face closer to his, silently prodding him to speak up.

"No, I... I just can't," Subaru said, burying his face in the palms of his hand. "Emilia, I'm so sorry. I won't ever leave you again, I promise you I won't." There was a brief pause and a moment's thought before he changed his mind. "It's just that..." he started, a quick break stifling his words, followed by a sob. He struggled immensely to choke out the words he so desperately wanted to release.

Emilia gave him another reassuring squeeze, indicating it was okay to go forward with what he was about to say. She was ready for anything he had to tell her.

"That—" he continued, his voice barely a murmur now.

With another pause, and this time longer, Subaru was very close to admitting a painful truth. Clearly, whatever he wanted to say was more difficult than any other confession. With a swallow, he said:

"I have been using the power of Return by—"

He hesitated before finishing the forbidden words.

Suddenly, the room got darker as if the moon was covered with a vast blanket, and the walls of the room closed slowly in on him. The air became thicker and more distasteful than it had been before.

Then, a ghastly voice echoed inside his mind:

"I shan't allow you to reveal our most guarded secret..."

As the passages of time had ceased, Subaru could see five shadowy arms reaching out from around him, until they finally rested around the silver-haired half-elf in front of him. Two hands clasped her throat, another her head, and the others held her arms down. Particles of gloom spilled over the soft contours of her body.

"No... please..." Subaru begged whatever lay behind the darkness. "Please just kill me instead..." The hopeless and defeat of his voice gave credence to his resignation to the shadowy being which resided inside of him. The tryst between him and Emilia was beckoning to an end.

The hands tightened their grasp on her throat, suffocating her. Her mouth opened slightly in response to the applied pressure to her windpipe. Another hand pulled her head upwards slowly, abnormally stretching her neck. The others held her down against the bed. Soon, her head would be pulled right off, and if not, surely, she would be throttled.

Rage spread across Subaru's face. Pure, blind rage. His brow furrowed, and his face warped into a snarl fiercer and more bloodthirsty unlike any other.

Then, he roared in agony, his voice cracking from the strain on his voice:

"Satella—!"

An extraordinary white light extended across the room and through the windows to the outside of the mansion. Its brilliance lit up the night sky which was otherwise completely dark. Vestiges of darkness fled from the power and spilled outside, letting Emilia fall backwards onto the bed, free from harm's way. She lay there unconscious, but otherwise she was unharmed.

Subaru centered himself away from his rage, and his eyes ceased their brilliant glow as he returned himself to the world at present.

Whatever magic pulling the passages of time back far enough to where water no longer flowed, ceased to be. Time was moving forward again. Subaru was certain of this because his teardrops were able to fall towards her sleeping face, dripping steadily down her cheeks.

Both of his hands were clasped around Emilia's, and he had straddled her sleeping form unknowingly. He couldn't understand when and how he had arrived in this position, but it was no doubt better than what was just occurring moments before. He fell flatly onto her unconscious body, letting the close contact of the half-elf wash away all worry and anxiety from his being. He buried his face into the crook of her neck, and shut his eyes.

He was tired and faced with an immeasurable amount of emotions no one should ever have to be concerned with. There was a time when he thought somehow, he could find peace in this world where none could be found. Maybe that future had long grown distant, to the point of being unreachable.

The latitudes he was faced with when deciding his fate in this world were next to nothing. Ever since he found himself here, his destiny had been shaped by something otherworldly and ungodly, resurrecting him over and over until the pathway he had chosen was that of someone not his own. If he couldn't be allowed to make his own decisions, then he would rather not exist at all.

He let out a sigh fuller and deeper than any ever before, one echoing a promise he had made to himself. A promise to take control of his life, to shape his destiny, and to write his own story. It was a story in which he yearned for an ending exuberating in happiness. Possibly, just possibly, he

could find that ending.

He smiled softly to himself and muttered something about the sleeping girl resting so carelessly underneath him. Her undying declarations of love to him... *thrice* he had received them. The first time he scoffed at her, tossing away the possibility those words could ever be hers. He feared such love. He feared what he did not understand. By now, he finally understood her love for him.

Suddenly, Subaru shivered, and he cuddled closer to the girl underneath him. He cracked open one eye, wondering why the temperature of the room had dropped so suddenly. Then, he saw something he wouldn't ever have expected.

There, nestled beside the two of them, was a small gray cat he had come to know very well. His folded left ear twitched as he narrowed his sapphire jeweled eyes at Subaru, who otherwise stared at him in shock.

"Pu-Pu-Puck!" Subaru sputtered hopelessly at the intruding spirit.

The little cat raised one of his paws to his mouth, imitating a '*Shhhhh...!*' to Subaru. One of his eyes closed in a cheeky wink, forcing Subaru's expression to collapse even further.

"You shouldn't wake Lia," the spirit said, pointing his other paw teasingly at the sleeping girl Subaru now so awkwardly laid upon. "She's been through a lot, so you should just let her sleep."

"How long have you been with us?" Subaru asked the Great Spirit. "I remember, at the burning village. I saw you—"

"Ah, I remember," he interrupted Subaru before he could finish. "I was much weaker than I am presently. Now, I can retain my physical shape once more, but only for... a little bit." The cat slowed his speech and let out a slow, sleepy yawn which made even Subaru want to take a nap.

"But why? Why did you vanish?"

"Because I didn't have a choice. If I didn't break my contract with Lia... she would have never succeeded in the trial. But it looks like that wasn't necessary, now was it?" The cat unceremoniously floated up and rested on Subaru's shoulder. He gave him a nudge with his paw. "Thanks to you, Lia was able to survive what happened, and now, she has something she has never had before."

"What do you mean?" Subaru asked, clearly confused.

"True love," he said, his words chosen carefully. "A love not for that of a parent, but that of a lover. It is something I could never to give Lia, even if she could never understand. It was painful for me to let her go—but I had to, you see. To give her something greater than myself. To give her a real reason to keep on living, and wishes other than those which aren't her own."

Subaru only nodded in understanding. Puck was giving him his blessing, and for that, he was innumerable thankful. He would not waste it, he promised silently to himself. "Thank you..." he replied. It was a short and curt statement. What else could he possibly say?

"Don't thank me, Subaru! I wouldn't have chosen you if I didn't think you weren't the one. When Lia has nightmares, I expect you to be the one to calm her. When Lia is lonely, I fully expect you to be the one to hold her hand. It's up to you now, you know?"

"I know!" Subaru smiled, and flashed Puck an assuring thumbs up.

Puck smiled, bared his teeth at him, and said, "Good... because if you don't..." He drew his paw across his throat in a threatening manner.

Subaru's eyes exploded, reminiscing of his past deaths at the hands of this playful cat. He shook his hands in dismissal and waved him off. "No, you don't have to tell me that," he said, and with determined eyes. "I know now what I have to do."

Puck struggled to stifle a yawn, signifying it was probably time for bed for both cats and humans... and elves. His eyes narrowed to slits, and then he uttered something which would haunt him for the foreseeable future:

"Let's get some sleep, now that the witch is gone and everything. Right, Subaru?"

Subaru's breath got caught in his throat. Sweat beaded between the creases of his forehead. Suddenly, the cool air emanating from the floating cat rescinded to a level of heat burning into his skin. He opened his mouth to speak, his voice a stuttering mess:

"*What...* did you just... say?"

"I said we should sleep. That would be the intelligent thing to do, before we wake Lia." The cat rest itself on the bed, curling up into a small ball of fuzz.

"No... *before* that," Subaru replied, but it was useless, as the cat was now fast asleep, his conscious fading quicker than he wanted.

He *knew*. He knew his secret. Only one other person knew... or even *suspected*—but even that person did not know why or how.

No, Puck knew it *all*.

Very soon, Subaru was overtaken by his own thoughts, and before long, he was pulled into the unrelenting grips of sleep.

* * *

His dream was like a vast, endless body of water, as unchanging and formless as the moonless night sky which watched over it. Yet, the stars of that night sky twinkled and shimmered ever so fervently, dotting the ocean with orbs of amber and gold.

It was something which existed only within the confines of his mind. In a place where time, physicality and other worldly ideas dared not tread, and because of this, his dream became a nightmare.

He wanted to go back to the world of the awake, to be free from the endlessness and uncertainty of himself. Here, within his own mind, was where he doubted himself the most. It was the place where a constant battle was fought, not against witch cultists, or bandits, or anyone else who may threaten him in the waking world—here, he spent eternity in strife with himself, constantly locked in a losing battle against his will.

He fell into the murky bottomless water, and down he sank. Further and further he dropped, until the light of the stars faded for good and left him shrouded in a darkness no human eye could see. Down here, there was nothing. It was a place bereft of all sound, sight, and feeling. It was almost like every sense he had come to know, plus love, was deafened. In its stead, a sinister and otherworldly vacancy sent shivers down his spine.

He curled up into a ball and resigned himself to his unlucky fate and sorrowful existence. There he remained for what felt like an eternity, before suddenly, he heard a voice:

Get up...

His eyes opened, straining to identify the noise in his mind.

Was this voice his own? It had to be his, who else could it have been?

He wanted to scream out loud, but no noise escaped his mouth. In fact, his mouth did not open at all, as if it had been sewn shut. He strained himself further, but was met with only silence.

Am I... asleep? he thought. Ah, he realized finally. It was just another dream; a dream where he was drowning in despair and rendered devoid of happiness. He had these dreams often, even when the waning moments preceding them were enjoyable and positive.

He blinked his eyes and shook his head to try and wake himself, but to no avail, locked as he was in this world of nothingness. Taking a good look of his surroundings, he could barely tell which direction was up or down. In this world removed from reality, direction was almost impossible to discern, as was any color, shape or form.

Would there be serendipity if he escaped this bottomless prison he had been tossed so carelessly into? *There's only one way to find out*, he thought.

Subaru pushed hard and kicked his feet with all his might. He was never a good swimmer, but here, in his mind, he could be anything he wanted. Faster, faster, he could feel he was travelling upward. Even though he could not see, he felt something deep inside which told him this was the right direction. The pressure of the depths began to relieve itself, and as he struggled more and more, he found he could finally see the blinking stars breaking through the crest of the ocean.

Just a little more... Just a little more... Just a lit—

Subaru awoke with his brow sweating and heart punching against his chest. He heaved air in and out, in and out, his lungs hopelessly bellowing and stoking a dwindling fire. His eyes darted from side to side, scanning one end of the decorative room to another. He was back in Emilia's old bedroom—in the Mathers mansion, no less.

The memory of the occurrences from the night before came back to him swiftly: the blade pointing at his neck... Emilia's plea for him to stop... the witch, Satella... Puck... and finally...

Subaru jerked forward and clutched his chest. *Has the witch finally left me alone? Could it really be true?* he thought. He shook his head skeptically and dismissed the eager thoughts, then laid back onto the bed and stared blankly at the carved wooded ceiling. Thoughts consumed him, and soon enough, he found himself in a deep introspection.

His thoughts drifted from one memory to the next, searching for answers and clues to what and why this was happening to him. He could remember all the times he had died and used Return by Death to seemingly resurrect himself in order to try again. Without it, he would not have made it five minutes into this newfound world he had so unexpectedly entered.

He remembered the numerous times he had tried to tell his friends about his ability, and the devastating effect it had on either him or his close friends. Each Return by Death had its similarities. First, there was a death, then a black void, and finally, he found himself sent back in time to a certain checkpoint he had acquired.

There was no rhyme or reason to the time selected, and he could find no answer to his questions. Further, as he lay in bed, he ruminated deeply about his past, until he came to a sudden realization. *There was a gap in his memory*, one which he previously had not given too much thought to it at all.

His mind returned to the night of the Great Hare.

In desperation, he had raced back to the Sanctuary, and soon found himself in front of the dark magician himself. Carelessly, the powerful mage dispatched both Ram and Garfiel in the vilest way possible. He then revealed his nefarious intentions and his knowledge of Subaru's Return by Death, before being torn apart by hundreds of white rabbits with razor-sharp teeth.

The mage had simply given up on this world, and this doomed timeline they found themselves in. He did not even partially consider the fact he'd be entirely erased from existence—in fact, it had not entered his consideration at all. His indifference to his own gruesome death couldn't be described as anything other than the most inane, pure quality of madness and absurdity—one which the current Subaru, to his horror, shared.

Subaru stumbled out of the doorway backwards, witnessing the last smile upon the magician's face. It was his dying declaration he truly believed Subaru would once again Return by Death and set things right with his newfound knowledge.

The Lewes clones had utterly abandoned him, fleeing in different directions, and because of that, he no longer had any protection from the rabbits surging in from all different directions. In a futile effort, he turned and ran as fast as his mortal body could let him.

Briefly breaking from his trance, Subaru's eyes widened and sweat dripped from the corner of his brow.

He remembered now: it was the moment before he went back to the tomb in order to rescue Emilia. He had fallen unconscious far before he reached his destination. It wasn't from the sight of the stoic magician being ripped into pieces, or the thoughts of Rem being devoured by the beast. No, it wasn't any of those things. Something otherworldly had overtaken him once he neared the entrance of Echidna's final resting place.

It felt like it always did, like his soul was being ripped from him, akin to the sensation of Return by Death. Except, this time, he *did not* Return by Death—something quite the opposite, in fact.

No matter how crazed he ran, he couldn't outrun the Great Hare. It had caught up to him, nipping at his feet, and soon consuming him piece by piece. One of the Hares had broken through into his stomach and gnawed its way through his internal organs. He forged on anyway, each footstep becoming lighter than the last as the beast shed more weight from his body.

It was pointless to run, but he knew of nothing else to do. It was simple—running away from his problems was something he had grown accustomed to; it's all he'd known. In this time of peril, he knew of nothing else other than to reach the only person left in this world who mattered to him, and to finally collapse in her arms and die another cold, bitter death.

The beasts ripped and tore at his innards, and finally a cavity opened near his abdomen, spilling his organs onto the snow. A trail of entrails followed Subaru as he took his last steps. Rabbits from all directions flung themselves on the forgotten organs, starved for a thousand years.

As Subaru continued, the world around him started to fade. He plummeted to the snowy ground unceremoniously, spewing the hares aside. Not to be abated for long, the rabbits plunged into

Subaru once more, ripping him apart through and through.

One rabbit ripped his left hand from its joint and scampered off into the night with it. Another rabbit took his eye, and another danced from finger to finger until only bloody nubs remained. In the corner of his remaining eye, he could see a couple of blood-stained rabbits popping their heads in and out of his abdomen, their striking red eyes filled with disappointment at the lack of flesh for them to devour.

Soon, there wasn't much left of Subaru. The faint glimmer in his eye dulled and the light of the world grew fainter, until only a shadow remained. Subaru's one eye rolled over and closed for a final time, and he found himself shrouded in darkness yet again. It was that sweet release from the pain and suffering, and then the odd sensation of Return by Death.

It beckoned him once again. There was a momentarily pause of thought, as his life functions thankfully ceased at last. Then blinding light, and a cold, fierce rush of wind jerked him from his trance.

His eyes opened once more. Curiously enough, Subaru lay face down in a snow which previously, had been painted red with blood, viscera and other remnants of his body. Now, it was as fresh as the snow currently descending from the night sky.

He turned over onto his back and sat up, his eyes peering from left to right, examining his surroundings carefully. Around him, there was nothing. The magical snow still fell as fast as ever, the wind howled furiously, but there was no sign of the Hare which had just consumed every bit of his body.

It would have appeared the Great Hare made short work of him and left the scene promptly in order to find more prey. He could still hear the shouts and screams of the villagers in the distance as they no doubt fell victim to the Hare's razor-sharp fangs.

But the question remained, why had Return by Death sent him to this moment? The lack of signs from the Hare was jarring indeed. Was he in the future? He certainly did not return to the past, like he normally should have. If this was the future, then wouldn't the snow be painted red with his lifeblood? It's almost as if—

Suddenly, Subaru's face contorted into something hideously disturbed. His normally-vibrant eyes turned lifeless, and his expression rapidly degenerated into something horrible.

Slowly, his mouth uttered a horrendous realization:

"Rem..."

There was silence, and then the name came from his lips once more:

Rem, Rem, Rem, Rem, he had said. He kept repeating her name over and over as if it were the only word he knew. With every syllable came a growing desperation which was like any other. Soon, his voice of disbelief turned to anger, and he let out a sorrowful yell which drowned out even the shrill shriek of the wind. His body twisted and turned, and he rolled around in a childish tantrum on the blood-red snow. His yelling turned to sobbing, and his sobbing turned to low moans of anguish.

It could only be described as a total loss of physical and mental control. His mind was registering a bereavement so powerful it tortured him more than the thousand deaths he had endured so far, and even if he suffered them all at once.

Soon, his convulsing ceased, and he froze in place as he stared blankly into the moonless night.

There, he lay as still as an ancient long-lost marble statue as the snow fell lazily from the skies.

"*Emilia...*" he hissed in an almost inaudible whisper.

The words were said, but none would know if it. His weak voice was drowned out in the roaring of the ice storm which surrounded the Sanctuary.

More determined than ever, Subaru turned his head toward the entrance of the witches' tomb. He could see the faint glowing aura of the main doorway from where he lay. He clenched his fist and furrowed his brow. His body was battered more than ever before and his energy was spent, but he had just enough in his reserves to do what must be done.

He had lost almost every meaningful thing to him—his parents, his friends, even the girl who loved him more than anyone. But *something* was different this time—he could tell the cosmic presence inside him, that dark figure which oozed a miasma of evil, was gone. If she was gone without word or explanation, then who would be there to help him cheat death like he had done so many times before? He could not risk death again, and if it happened, he might not return at all.

He had one more chance, and as doomed as this world was, there was still reason for him to draw breath.

Quickly, he pushed himself up and took a step forward, disappearing into the torrent of blistering cold.

The world twisted and malformed into darkness yet again, and once more, he was greeted with the familiar wood carved ceiling of a jewel adorned mansion.

As he got up from the bed, he was greeted with the sound of the door cracking open slowly. A small hand crept around the door as its owner pushed it open far enough for her to peek around and peer into the room.

"Su-Subaru?" Emilia stammered with a nervousness evident in her voice. "Are you awake?"

Subaru stood there silently, gazing blankly at his unsure guest. He scratched his head and sighed deeply, before speaking. "Hey there, Emilia," he said, his voice just as quiet as hers, but gaining more confidence with every syllable. "How are you feeling?"

The young half-elf was caught off-guard by his question, and she found there was a catch in her voice, stifling her response. She shimmied around the door before making eye contact. "Well, I kind of have a headache, but..." Emilia said as she came into full view. Her arm clasped her wrist behind her back—she was nervous. "I'm more concerned about you, Subaru."

The hint of worry in her voice was legitimate. Her voice was very soft, and unusually unassertive. Sure, her tone was typically soft, but *never* insecure. He must have made her worried sick about him. How long had he been unconscious? What had she been doing all this time? These were questions he would have liked immediate answers to.

She smiled at him and inched closer to where Subaru stood, closing the distance between them to about halfway.

Subaru chose to go with the latter question. "I'm okay, Emilia... I'm fine, I really am," he said as he flashed her a quick—but—assuring faux smile, and then spoke again, "Say, Emilia, what have you been doing around here while I've been sleeping?"

Emilia looked at the floor briefly, before responding, "Erm... Well, you see... with the mansion

abandoned, there really isn't a lot to do around here. I mostly spent my time speaking with the lesser spirits, gathering supplies, and..." Her voice trailed off hesitantly and never recovered.

For a long moment, there was silence about the room. Subaru eyed his half-elf partner with careful, steady eyes, but her facial expression was icy and betrayed no emotion to him. Finally, after some time, Emilia's lips trembled slightly and a small cry escaped her mouth, breaking the quiet.

Walking carefully, Subaru took the crestfallen girl by her arm in a consoling manner and led her to the bed. Gently, he lowered her down and took a seat next to her while she sobbed softly next to him.

He had no idea what was bothering her, but he could tell whatever it was had impacted her greatly. It was not often he saw something disturb Emilia so greatly, other than when she was attempting the trials at the witches' tomb. He could remember quite vividly how he found her splayed out on the tomb floor, disconsolate.

After her small and irregular sobs ceased, Subaru found the courage to speak, "Tell me, Emilia." His voice was both nurturing and caring. As he whispered this into her ear, he stroked her head and drew careful circles along the contours of her back.

Emilia closed her eyes in dejection. Next to him, she stayed silent for quite some time, and her response seemingly would never come. She rested her head on Subaru's shoulder and nestled closely against him. It was minutes before she spoke.

"I saw their graves," Emilia finally admitted, her voice sullen—and mournful. "Even though they were unmarked, the lesser spirits told me who they belonged to..."

Subaru's face turned downcast, and he couldn't find the will to meet her swirling amethyst eyes with his own gaze.

She had no doubt discovered the makeshift graves of both Petra and Frederica, which he haphazardly erected after they were slaughtered. There *should* be three—if there were any remains of Beatrice. These deaths were his own fault—he truly felt responsible for what had happened. He had numerous opportunities to keep them alive and find a pathway to life for all his friends, but he had failed. Their deaths rested squarely on his own shoulders, and for that, he would keep their memory with him wherever he traveled, and until the end of his days.

Moments later, a whisper broke their silence.

"It's all my fault," Subaru confessed, before pausing momentarily. His voice was a barely audible to his partner who sat just inches from himself. "If I had done something more to protect them, they would still be here. If I had only made the right choices, instead of the wrong ones, everyone would still be alive. If only I had been faster. If only, if only, if only..." His voice grew bleaker with every repetition, and soon he paused once more, before continuing with a confession, "I had so many chances, Emilia, don't you see? I had every given opportunity to set things right, and save the day, but I fucked it up. I wish you knew how worthless I really was. I wish you knew how many times I found ways to get myself killed—or worse, everyone around me. If I wasn't so powerless, maybe I could have protected them."

Subaru's voice grew hoarser and hoarser with every word. By now, his mouth was dry, his emotions filling it with a rawness he had long lost control of.

Emilia was confused, but did nothing but sit next to him and absorb his ill-timed confession as if she understood him. Soon, she realized, Subaru was now weeping, his emotions let loose like dam

which had finally been broken.

"You just don't know, Emilia... You don't know, nobody does. Nobody can understand me... Why can't anyone understand me? Why?" His question wasn't posed toward Emilia or anyone else, but himself.

The grief which filled the room was now palpable. Emilia was ill-accustomed to seeing Subaru in such a broken-down state of mind. This was *not* normal, she knew that. And those words he spoke... they made little to no sense to her. What 'chances' were he talking about? To her knowledge, he had never failed to do anything, and the only lives lost were those just recently in the past week.

She brushed aside those questioning thoughts and passed it off as Subaru just being so distraught, he knew not what he was saying—that was the only rational explanation she could come up with his confession. What he was saying... it was simply not possible. It shouldn't be possible. How could he live more than once? How could he have died before, and still be sitting next to her—warm, full of life, and filled with emotion?

With great care, she touched his chin with her fingertips and lifted him to meet her at eye level. His swirling hazel orbs were so full of pain; they were red, swollen, and dotted with teardrops which had yet to fall. It was a distressing sight, and with it, she knew her grief paled in comparison to his own. Emilia just continued to stare into his pained hazel eyes. Her other hand snaked up his neck and along his cheek, before it spread itself across the side of his head in a loving caress.

It was there she held his posture until she found the willpower to say something. "I don't understand, Subaru," she said, her voice as tender and caring as she could conjure. "But even though I know not why, I will do everything I can to be there for you and make you smile again. Because, without your smile, I can't smile, and without you, I don't want to be here."

Subaru absorbed her words with as much thought as he could give anything in the world. Just like all those times before, her soothing voice lulled him into a trance like state unlike any other. Soon, his breathing returned to something more normal and his mind appeared to cool to a level where he could now properly think with rationality.

For a long time, Subaru stayed silent as he considered both her words and what he had confessed to her.

What was most concerning to him, is he had unintentionally confessed his power of Return by Death to Emilia, risking both his life and her own. Yet, she sat just next to him, her heart still beating, full of life as it should. There was no sign of Satella, nor was there a crushing pain in his chest, or a dark miasma covering the area in darkness. Most of all, that cold chill which ran down his spine anytime the witch revealed her presence, was nowhere to be found. To put it quite succinctly, everything was normal.

Subaru swallowed. He really had confessed his most confidential secret to Emilia. His mind was so overcome by emotion and irrational thought he didn't consider a single word which escaped his mouth. Fortunately, he did not even know if she understood anything he had said.

To the regular individual, speaking of second chances and dying numerous times would fall on deaf ears more often than naught. No, it would be even worse. He would be dismissed as insane, and from hence forth anything he said would be taken with the lightest grain of salt.

The truth was... he hoped this conversation would be dropped for good, so he wouldn't have to explain himself again. He couldn't risk speaking about his former ability in more detail. Any

mention of it would constantly put himself or his only reason for living at great peril. For sure, he would love to share his plight with Emilia, but it was indeed his plight no more. He was no longer burdened with Return by Death, and for that, he could now live a 'normal' life again.

Subaru gave Emilia a slight nod, then pressed his lips against her forehead, nestling himself against her in an act of understanding. Moments passed without much vocal interaction, as the two lovers snuggled up against each other.

His small gestures of love spoke louder and cut deeper than anything he could say to her. Not only was it their personal method of communication, but what words could he say to her anyway? What she said, he already knew, and what he could tell her, she could not possibly understand, nor did he want her to. The risk was simply too great.

Even so, Emilia truly did understand what Subaru was going through, without even fully grasping the surrounding circumstance. Sure, she had questions of her own, but she hoped in time, they would be answered at the pace Subaru was comfortable at. She could tell that something was affecting him so greatly it could not be mended with just a few words or small acts of love.

Emilia would not press him further on the matter, she decided. She would let him come to her, as she always had. Until then, she would give him as much love and comfort as she could, no matter what or how things turned out. She wanted to be there for him, as he had been there for her so many times before. She turned and burrowed her face into his chest.

The past week had been an emotional roller-coaster for both Subaru and her. It felt like no matter what they did or where they went, misfortune would still be waiting for them around every corner. Somehow, she just wanted to get away from it all and put the past behind her, as she had always done before. Someday, her life would be peaceful and happy.

With just the two of them... she *knew* it could happen.

Her thoughts turned to those of tranquility, and her furrowed brow and strained face was replaced with a calm repose. In her mind, she could see blue skies, and a peaceful river... a log cabin by the river, and a cool, gentle breeze which blew the trees with an almost metronome like rhythm. Emilia's eyes lidded slightly, and the rise and fall of her chest began to stabilize. Soon, her eyes shut and did not reopen.

Subaru, taking notice of his lover unexpectedly going limp in his arms, gently scooted out from under her grasp. He observed her resting form and sighed to himself. How tired was she if she fell asleep so easily like that?

The silence in the room stretched on while Subaru stood by and thought to himself. Soon, he turned around and exited, finding himself in one of the mansion's long hallways. It was an eerie feeling. Eerie at just how empty and deserted the mansion felt, now that all its inhabitants had been killed off. Just a footstep sent echoes down the long chambers, and you could hear a pin drop from one end of the mansion to the other.

Subaru collected his thoughts as best he could. His mind was still swirling with questions about Satella, Puck, and not to mention the events from the weeks past. Slowly, he walked down the hallway leading to the main entrance of the mansion. His stomach growled painfully, making him realize he was starving.

His first stop would be the kitchen.

Sometime later, Subaru emerged from the hallways and into the grand hall. Thrown over his back

was a sack filled full of appas, pepples, cheese, and other vegetables he found stored in the kitchen's storeroom. Luckily enough, it appeared some magic was cast over it to keep it from ever spoiling.

There was a treasure trove-like amount of food in there it could feed them for months if they so pleased. Sure enough, the growling of his stomach had ceased, and he found himself unconditionally full because of how much he had gorged himself on the endless delights of the mansion.

Rays of bright orange bled through the glass windows of the mansion. It was now late in the day and the sun was apparently setting. He didn't quite know how long he had been asleep yet, but it must have been more than twelve hours.

Since then, he had found food and other supplies they could use when they go back to their travels. He had also gathered his belongings and retrieved his forgotten sword which was left near the front door of the mansion.

Once Emilia awakened, they would leave this place, and hopefully for good. He didn't want to spend any more time here than they needed to, and he felt they were already here far longer than they should be.

Soft footsteps resonated behind him. He turned to meet the familiar face of Emilia, who was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"Hey, Emilia," Subaru called, his voice was both reassuring and positive.

While rubbing her sleepy eyes, Emilia responded, "Subaru, I'm *sooo* sorry. I don't know what came over me... I guess I was more tired than I thought I was."

"Well, I'll say," Subaru quipped in his usual witty way, before continuing, "You followed me all the way here, remember? Here, catch."

Subaru tossed Emilia an appa he had in his hand. Emilia caught it clumsily and stared at it carefully. It was a bright red color, clearly fresh and ready to eat.

"An appa?" Emilia questioned, taken aback by the strange foreign fruit. She let out a giggle. "You remembered not to give me a pepple this time, didn't you? I *reeeally* don't like those!"

Laughing quietly, Subaru waved her off in a cool way. "I may make mistakes, but I try not to make the same mistakes twice, you know?"

Emilia took a bite of the appa and swooned. It tasted delicious, especially because of how hungry she was. Pausing between bites, she whispered, "Thank you, Subaru. You really do think of everything."

By now the orange glow outside had faded to a gloomier blue color. After Emilia had finished her appa, she walked over to Subaru and took him by his hand, catching him off guard. Then she turned her gaze toward the entrance of the mansion.

Emilia then turned her head to him and gave him a soft smile. "Come with me," she urged with a gentle voice. "I want to show you something, Subaru."

Her smile was the most angelic, loveliest thing he had ever laid his eyes on. When he was under stress, he found calm in her smile. When things were at their worst, her smile brought him back from the deepest recesses of darkness.

Without really knowing it, he found himself following her out the door, and to the graves which sat near the center of the mansion garden. Overhead, the cloudless sky allowed the moon to bask the entire area in a low-lit moonlight. It was pleasant out, as the sounds of the night contrasted heavily with the dark, depressing mood of the abandoned mansion.

Emilia and Subaru stopped in front of the two graves. They were not so familiar from when he last left them in their makeshift form. Before, they were just two sticks of wood jutting out of the ground haphazardly. Now, in their place, were two headstones made of rock, with the names '*Frederica Baumann*' and '*Petra Leyte*' etched out carefully along its base.

Subaru knelt softly beside Petra's grave and ran his fingers across its name as if he were caressing the young girl herself. He turned to Emilia and gave her a teary-eyed smile. It was both happiness and sadness which encapsulated him.

"You made these?" he asked, his voice faltering ever so slightly. "These are beautiful, Emilia. What I had here before, I put together in only a few minutes. I didn't have enough time to give them a proper burial. I had to get back to the Sanctuary before..." His voice trailed off as he unexpectedly lost his power of speech.

Shyly, Emilia said, "Yes, well... sort of. These headstones were already here at the mansion, hidden in the main storeroom. I just etched their names into them with my ice magic. I decided it was proper we mark their final resting place in the most appropriate way. I'm sorry I could not get something better."

"These are already perfect," Subaru praised, pausing a moment before turning his back to her. There was a heavy thickness in his throat as he continued further. "You don't have to be sorry about anything. If anyone needs to be sorry, it's me for letting this happen to them."

Emilia could tell the pain in his voice had returned from earlier. He really did feel he was to blame for their untimely demise. Even without seeing his face right now, she knew he bore a pained expression which made her heart sink below water.

Slowly, Emilia reached over to him and touched him on the shoulder. It was a simple one which served to remind him he wasn't as much of a failure as he thought he was—quite the opposite for her, in fact. He was her *hero* now, her *knight*, and her *protector*. He had to be strong for her, and if he couldn't, she would be strong for him and show him the way.

"I know you feel so much pain for what happened," Emilia said, choosing her words very carefully. "But to me, Subaru, you are everything—remember that, please. If you ever feel hurt, or unsure about yourself, I want you to know, you are my world now."

Subaru turned, and his shocked expression locked with her soft, gentle gaze. For the first time, Subaru looked further into her deep swirling purple eyes than he ever had before. There, he saw not the Witch Satella or the mysterious sorcerer half-elf he met on his first day in Lugnica.

No, this time, he saw the true Emilia.

Seconds passed, and soon Subaru found himself falling in love with her again a thousand times over. He threw his arms around her with such force it threatened to knock her to the floor. It was a desperate, flailing hug as if he were about to be separated from her for the rest of his life.

"Emilia, I love you so much!" he exclaimed.

She just nodded and smiled to herself, returning the hug in kind with her own as he burrowed his

face into her neck. He absorbed her enchanting smell with a long, drawn out breath against the cream of her skin. He could get used to being this close to her.

It was only now he realized how stupid he had been. He could not leave this world, not in death, or despair, or in any way. He must stay here, for her. He must give her everything he has to offer, even if it didn't amount to much. She had saved his life, and in more ways than one. Physically, she had saved him before, but mentally, she had resuscitated him from near death more than she could ever understand.

Her importance could not go understated, not anymore.

He would make it well known to her she completed him just as much as he completed her.

Moments passed before Subaru found his voice again. "I'm so, so sorry," he apologized, his voice breaking, but he continued anyway, "I'm sorry for everything... Emilia." Tears fell, but not tears of sadness. They were tears of unabashed joy.

He kept whispering how sorry he was into her pointed ear, and it tickled her. Emilia let out a giggle and whispered back to him, "You don't have to be sorry, Subaru."

"I'm so sorry for what I did," Subaru said, his voice as low as a whisper passing through a noisy tavern. "I'm sorry for betraying your trust, Emilia. From now on, I promise, until the heart in my chest stops beating, and I'm long dead, that I will never, ever, leave you!"

"I know."

She smiled to him in such a way he knew she understood him. She believed him, she trusted him, and she *loved* him. All these things were true, because this smile was something she gave to him only.

His audible vow was made, yes; but the solemn vow he made in his heart, would be known only to himself. He wasn't Natsuki Subaru, the shut-in, any longer; from now on, he was Natsuki Subaru, lover and partner of the half-elf, Emilia.

Henceforth, he wasn't alone, and his decisions could not be determined just by himself.

No, his decisions from now on would be in the interests of her and her alone.

Interlude Under a Lugnican Sky

A gentle zephyr rolled through the scented Lugnican air, which caused the scarlet royal dragon banners overhead to flap momentarily before they became still once more. Fruit vendors, fish peddlers, butchers, and craftsmen of all trades lined the edges of the cobblestone lane—the central one which led to the Royal Castle. During the season of the red-sun, the weather was hot, and humid, but agreeable nonetheless.

Already, just half past noon, there were wagons being pulled by ground-dragons flooding the roads—the sounds of all the hustle and bustle were deafening to all, except those few blessed with the Divine Protection of Acoustic Resistance.

Amongst the hurried crowds, a young, black haired man stood silently, staring intensely at the signpost in front of him, struggling to read the foreign glyphs he had taken so much time to learn. His eyes narrowed as he translated the glyphs slowly into his own native language, but due to them being I-script, it took longer than he would have liked.

Margrave Mathers Missing—Royal Selection Candidate Presumed Dead! he read, suddenly realizing the news of what happened at the Sanctuary was only just now reaching the general populace.

Subaru heard quick, light footsteps coming from behind him—then a voice filled with contempt. "So that half-demon is dead, huh?"

Hearing this new voice, Subaru turned his attention to a finely clothed man standing adjacent to himself. "What did *you* just say?" he growled threateningly, failing to hide his disdain for the man, though quickly correcting his tone. "I-I mean... what does this board say; I can't read it?"

The nobleman turned to Subaru and smiled softly, "Ah, another illiterate... very well; where to begin?" Slowly, the nobleman inched his face close to the board and adjusted his monocle. His white-gloved finger rose to the first glyph and moved slowly across the board, absorbing each detail meticulously as if he were studying an ancient text.

Subaru felt himself going red. It kept every ounce of his restraint from losing his cool demeanor. He glared at the nobleman. "I deeply appreciate your help. I just wanted to know what's going on, that's all."

Done reading to himself, the nobleman exchanged another look with Subaru. "Well, there's both good news and bad news here. The bad news: Margrave Mathers is either dead or missing. His mansion was found ransacked, and the neighboring village of Irlam was deserted. Scouts were sent to the Sanctuary of Kremaldy, where the place was found burnt to the ground down to every last building."

"Burnt to the ground?" Subaru asked, in a different tone than before. His voice altered, turning much darker, catching even the nobleman off guard.

"Well, yes, that is correct," he continued, drawing his gaze back to the noticeboard. "It says here the fires seemed to have started recently, maybe a day or two prior. However, the cathedral was burned down much earlier, maybe even a week's time."

"A week earlier?" Subaru queried, clearly surprised. It had been almost two weeks since the Great Hare had attacked, and this signpost had the posted date of today. That would mean someone else

went back to the Sanctuary and wiped clean whatever remained from the events before. *Someone must be trying to cover their tracks...* he thought. *But who?*

The nobleman nodded. "It continues—none of Margrave Mathers' subjects were found, and it is assumed none have survived whatever occurred there. This includes the half-demon, *Emilia*—otherwise known as the Royal Selection Candidate, who was just recently sponsored by Margrave Mathers himself. Due to there being no King, a new Royal Sorcerer cannot be selected, and Margrave Mathers' lands have been absorbed by the Kingdom of Lugnica under the authority of the Sage Council. It says as well, the neighboring village of Nicia was sacked and destroyed, and it is unknown what caused it—all survivors of the incident were found to be suffering from some manner of mental incapacitation, including the village head, Neryemar."

"And... the good news?" Subaru eyed him carefully.

The man pondered thoughtfully before responding, "Ah yes, I was getting there. It seemed after the coalition between the two camps resulted in the demise of the White Whale, Lady Crusch has declared both Lady Anastasia and Lady Priscilla enemies of war—out of an abundance of caution. She seems to be just a *little* paranoid about what happened to Margrave Mathers."

Subaru winced. "How is that *good* news?" he asked, wondering if there was a punchline to the joke. "The future rulers of Lugnica shouldn't be squabbling over what happened... no, they should be finding out the cause of it! What is fighting each other going to solve?"

"You may have a point, but from a trader's standpoint, this type of discourse will be very good for the Lugnican markets."

"That's... such a stupid answer," Subaru said, the low growl of his voice making it clear he almost didn't want to respond.

The nobleman snorted. "From your point of view, maybe; however, there will be a growing dissatisfaction amongst the Kingdom's Commercial Union, if their trade restrictions and tariffs aren't lifted before long. Anastasia Hoshin would be the ideal candidate for Lugnica trade—with that pitiful half-devil out of the way, the list of contenders grows shorter. Imagine that, sponsoring a half-witch to be the leader of the Dragon Kingdom of Lugnica—it was a jest for sure, a joke made in poor taste from the court jester Margrave Mathers himself." The nobleman let out a hearty laugh.

That was it—Subaru suddenly stepped forward and grabbed the nobleman by the collar of his silk shirt. "You take back what you said about her, you bastard," he spat, visibly upset at the nobleman's callous words. "You take that back now, or I'll—"

"Enough—!" A feminine voice interrupted Subaru—a voice he knew all too well.

Both Subaru and the shocked nobleman turned their heads in the direction of the new voice. Subaru's grip tightened around the man's collar as he met eyes with Emilia—her eyes piercing as if she were a mother disappointed in her child.

"Emilia..." he began, his voice roughening and his grip weakening under her pointed gaze. "This isn't what it looks like. This bastard right here—he needs to be taught a lesson. I'm tired of arguing with these people..."

The nobleman realized it was the right moment for him to pull back, slapping Subaru's hand away disgustedly. Subaru let him do it and put up no resistance.

"I will call the guards immediately!" he exclaimed triumphantly while adjusting his tie. "Mark my words! I'll see you thrown in the jail for laying your grubby little hands on me. To think a human like yourself would go to such lengths to defend a half-demon, a spawn of the Witch—nothing more than a freak! If I were in charge, I would make sure none of these witch-spawn drew breath any longer!"

It was all very sudden—the young hooded woman stepped forward, then a brutal *slap* right across the nobleman's left cheek, sending him back against the noticeboard dizzied and incoherent.

Emilia's breath was uneven, and she clearly had lost all self-control due to the man's vile words. Her hands were down by her side, were tightened into fists, her knuckles turning white from the pressure. Her expression was one of anger, sadness, and disappointment—so much so Subaru could tell she might fry *and* freeze this guy at barely a moment's notice.

Her normally pale complexion began to flush a deep red, but before she could open her mouth, Subaru grabbed her arm with his right hand and pulled her against him.

Looking into her purple eyes as her pupils the color of cyan bore a hole into him, he pleaded, "Emilia, you just need to ignore him. His mind is already made up—nothing you say or do is going to change him. I was wrong to start a fight with him, but sometimes I just get so mad when people treat you like this."

She pulled away slightly, and Subaru released her arm, letting her step away from him just a bit. Instinctively, Subaru looked around to examine their surroundings. By now, a couple denizens who had been passing by had stopped to see what the commotion was. Subaru realized they were drawing unwanted attention to themselves and they should move away from here, *quickly*. His gaze turned back toward Emilia, who stood in front of him, clearly pouting.

She placed her hands on her hips and retorted, "You don't always need to protect me, Subaru. I know you must always feel you are my sword and shield, but sometimes... let *me* be the sword for once."

Subaru took her hand again and gave it a tug. "Look, Emilia... I'm really sorry, but can we go argue about this somewhere else?" He turned his head and looked over his shoulder to see the nobleman had regained consciousness and was running off to call the guards.

Her free hand rose to her mouth, shocked. "Oh, no! Let us flee from here!"

As if on cue, they could see two guards running toward them from the distance. Pulling Emilia along with him, Subaru dashed into the large crowd on the sidewalk and disappeared into the throngs of patrons and merchants alike, leaving the two guards without any hope of capturing them.

Moments later, after they had passed into the depths of safety, Emilia fell out of step and while panting, she tucked her silver hair back into her hood. She was breathless from running, but was nonetheless bent on pressing the previous conversation from before. She stood up straight and prodded Subaru in the chest with her pointer finger.

"Sometimes I'm *veeery* disappointed with you, Subaru!" Emilia scolded, her lilac eyes shining with a playful glint. "I know you are *my* knight, but sometimes you need to have a little more faith in me!"

Subaru brushed off his leather jerkin and made a polite bow, mockingly. "Oh, *my* Lady Emilia, I am so, so sorry—what ever can I do to make things up to you?"

She smiled but didn't laugh. "Please don't bow, *my* knight. While you have disappointed your Lady, she is a very forgiving person—but you can make it up to me by letting me stand by your side, instead of you standing in front of me, you big dunderhead!"

Subaru realized while this was a joking matter, what she said was deadly serious. She wanted to be equals with him, and she wanted to protect him just as much as he wanted to protect her. This wasn't the first time she wanted Subaru to know she was tired of his protectiveness, as it had happened already many times before.

Hopefully this time, it would be the last, he thought. "I'm really sorry," Subaru then replied. "But sometimes I just can't help myself with you, Emilia! That guy was saying such disgusting things about you, and I couldn't control myself this time. Usually, I defend you with words, but this time... this time, I wanted to beat some sense into that guy. There was something so wrong with his point of view—I knew I couldn't argue with him, and I certainly couldn't convince him."

"You don't have to always defend me!" Emilia said, her tone rising. "You know I'm strong enough to defend myself! I've been going through this my whole life, and I will probably have to deal with it for the rest of it... You understand that, don't you, Subaru?"

His eyes widened in understanding. "I was being selfish again, wasn't I?" Subaru asked rhetorically, letting out a dark chuckle. "This seems to be a repeating pattern—something ingrained in my nature I can't be rid of."

"I don't need another apology, Subaru," Emilia said quickly, and as firmly as she could. "Don't feel as if you have to apologize to me for anything. I know how you are, but if we are going to be together like this—we should have arguments like this once and a while. Puck once told me it's good for healthy relationships to have arguments!"

It was one of the reasons Subaru loved her—she was so understanding. She strived hard to give every word escaping her soft lips as much thought as she could, so her words would never hurt anyone. Even now, after the devastating events which took place, Emilia was still the same as ever.

Subaru flashed her a quick, loving smile. "You really are something special, little Emilia."

At the return of her pet name, Emilia pouted heavily. Then, she could hear an odd sound—it took her a second to realize Subaru was indeed, laughing, and it was a jovial laughter he hadn't let out in quite some time.

Emilia's face went red. "Subaru you... You blockhead!"

Subaru raised his hands in order to calm Emilia—it was difficult to suppress the continued laughter he wanted to release. He didn't want to tease her too much, just poke fun at her a little bit.

"There you go with those antiquated names again," he teased her carefully. "What are you going to call me next, I wonder?"

"Oh, Subaru... there's *pleenty* more where that came from."

By now, the two had closed the gap between themselves, to where their foreheads were almost touching during their argument.

"Oh yeah? Let 'er rip, let's see what you got!"

"Let it *rip*...?" Emilia asked, clearly confused at what he meant. "Is that another perverted word I don't know about? Subaru, you pervert!"

Subaru's smile widened. "Why do you always think everything I say has a sexual connotation? That's just not the case! Maybe *you* are the perverted one, after all! Doesn't it seem like your mind is always travelling to the wrong places?"

Emilia's cheeks turned red and she shut her eyes in abashment. "You take that back right now, Subaru!"

"Emilia the Pervert! Emilia the Pervert! Emilia the Pervert!" Subaru repeated, and she grew redder and redder every time he said it.

"—Stop!" Emilia resisted, pulling her cat-eared hood further over her head to make sure her appearance was concealed. "We're in public, you know! What if someone hears you?"

By now, another bout of laughter escaped his throat. "You should see your pretty face!" he said, struggling to speak through his convulsions. "You are just too cute, little Emilia!"

"You know I dislike being teased, Subaru! It's... It's embarrassing..." she paused, and found her voice again after a moment. "...I just can't weather these indignities, especially when they come from you!"

Subaru patted her on the shoulder, reassuringly. "Okay, okay, that's enough I suppose. Sometimes I just can't help myself, you know, Emilia? You are just *too* adorable when you are pouting or embarrassed! It's times like these I had almost totally forgotten about!"

"Even though I dislike your teasing, you are right," Emilia said, regaining her composure. "It has been a while... since we talked like this, I mean. This almost feels like a long-forgotten memory, even though it really wasn't that long ago!"

Subaru gave her a heart-warming smile. "It's like I always said: Once you get past the bad times, the good times have to follow, right?"

"Right!" Emilia returned his smile with her own, melting him with her cuteness. "Which reminds me—" From a pocket inside her cloak she withdrew a small pouch of gold. "I guess I forgot to tell you, but I borrowed a bit of blessed gold from the mansion before we left. I figured if we took a trip to the capital, it would show its usefulness. More importantly, I wanted to look for a *Pyroxene* mana crystal—for Puck."

"A Pyroxene crystal?" Subaru asked, scratching the side of his head. "Oh, yeah! I remember that. It's one of those crystals which can hold a Great Spirit inside of them, right? We can find one of those here?"

Emilia nodded and said, "Yes, there is a store around here which sells magical items of great value. They are usually pretty expensive, and difficult to obtain... so they may not have any, but I wanted to check just to be sure."

Subaru looked off into the distant horizon where the Lugnica Keep rest at the top of the mountain. The sun was currently high in the sky, signifying it was still early in the afternoon. By now, the dragon-carriages and wagons pouring in and out of the capital had ceased to a halt, stuck in some sort of medieval traffic—if that could even exist in the first place.

Subaru held out his hand for Emilia. "Let's start now before it gets too late. We wouldn't want to miss it because the store closed."

Taking his hand, she clasped her fingers around his own and smiled. "Thank you, Subaru! This means so much to me; I hope you know that. If there's a chance for me to reform my contract with

Puck, I must have one of those crystals."

The pair began walking down the Lugnican sidewalk, scanning the signs for any mention of magical goods. As the two walked side-by-side, hand-in-hand, Subaru turned his head to Emilia and smiled.

Her sublime beauty captured every ounce of his attention. She hadn't noticed he was gawking at her while they walked as a couple—because if she had, her cheeks would be painted a bright blood-red due to how lustful his gaze was.

Her physical beauty was unmatched by anyone else in this world, yes, but it was the beauty of her personality, her character, and her actions which made her stand out above all the rest. Even with all her imperfections, her perfections were more than just a step ahead—they went on for miles and would likely not be matched.

Suddenly, a gentle voice broke him from his trance.

"Hey, Subaru, are you listening to what I just said?" Emilia questioned, staring at him with eyes of lavender.

Subaru shook his head and said, "Sorry, I was just deep in thought, that's all."

Emilia tilted her head cutely. "Oh, I see. Erm... I said we—Oh, never mind, just look above you." Instead of explaining, she pointed her finger toward a wooden sign which was painted blue and in the shape of a crystal—much like the one Emilia wore at the base of her neck. *Magical Assortments and Relics*, the signpost read.

"Ah, so we found it," Subaru said, running his hand through his dark hair coolly.

"We?" she asked, giggling quietly to herself. "Yes, well... let's go ahead and look inside. I'm sure there's going to be lots of interesting items in here, so don't wander too far without me! I don't want us spending all of our gold here today."

Subaru nodded and followed Emilia into the magical shop. As they stepped inside, Subaru's eyes widened in shock.

The shop was much bigger on the inside than it had appeared from the streets of Lugnica. Not only was the store filled with both human and demi-human customers alike, but he could tell the store itself appeared almost magical. There were tall winding wood shelves which reached high above into the air, and were adorned with trinkets, items, and assortments alike. *There's no way this store was this big*, he thought, as he looked up and down, taken aback at how vast everything was.

Subaru then knelt and eyed one of the labels on a shelf.

Bokko fruits – 1 blessed gold coin each, it read. These fruits were an item of particular value which restored mana, he remembered. Taking a handful of the Bokko fruits, Subaru wrapped them in paper and stored them in his pocket. He knew these would come in handy during any future excursion they might have.

Standing once more, Subaru looked around. He couldn't see Emilia anywhere, as she had already run off deeper into the store in search for her crystal she so eagerly wanted. Subaru shrugged and kept walking along the shelves, eyeing what else the store had to offer.

Taking a *Metia* off the shelf, Subaru looked at it carefully. He had lost his cellphone some time ago, but he couldn't help but laugh to himself at how he played it off as a Metia for so long. They

truly looked nothing alike, and probably didn't have close to the same functions.

Suddenly, a patron to Subaru's right turned around and gasped. "Look, is that who I think it is?" he said, while pointing at the entrance to the shop.

There, blanketed by light, was an older white-haired gentleman garbed in a black-silken vest and a white-collared undershirt. At his side hung a long blade, the golden hilt glistening brilliantly in the light. He placed his left hand on his hilt and stood up straight, his perpetual frown threatening to strike fear into all who bore witness to it.

"Wilhelm?" Subaru disbelievingly muttered quietly, immediately turning to conceal his presence.

"That's the *Sword Demon*, Wilhelm van Astrea!" the nameless patron hissed, turning to Subaru before continuing. "After what happened at the Mathers domain, it was said Master Wilhelm came out of retirement in order to bring those responsible to justice. It was said he broke his oath to Lady Crusch in order to claim the *Holy Sword Astrea* for himself and take up the mantle of knighthood once again. After serving faithfully for years, I wonder what could have possibly pushed him to make such a drastic decision?"

"Wilhelm broke his oath to Crusch?" Subaru gasped after a moment. "He broke his contract for us?" He couldn't believe Wilhelm would go to such great lengths to avenge the deaths of someone who wasn't even his master.

Wilhelm walked proudly into the shop and passed Subaru, leaving the young man shocked in his wake. Subaru just stared as he disappeared into the back of the store, unsure of what to think or do. As much as he wanted to call out to Wilhelm and let him know both he and Emilia were okay, he couldn't—or else Emilia would be endangered yet again if word got out she was still alive.

While he waited for Emilia to come back, he found himself deep in thought. How would he explain to her what was happening? She would no doubt be disturbed to hear the notion of her demise had caused such political ramifications. No doubt, if Emilia found out, she would make it known she was still alive, even if it caused her personal risk. That was the kind of person Emilia was—self-sacrificing, even if it to a fault. Should he hide the truth from her, or should he tell her and let her make her own decision?

After a minute of thought, Subaru decided he would tell her, since he figured, in time, she would discover what was happening anyway.

Gentle footsteps pulled him from his introspections—there, in front of him, was Emilia, emptyhanded.

"They didn't have a crystal," she lamented. "They stated just recently, someone had ordered a large shipment of them which put them out of stock. I inquired further as to where or when we could get another one, but they didn't have any answers."

"I see, that's too bad," Subaru said, scratching the growing scruff on his chin. "Let's go somewhere else, then. I don't like lingering in the same spot at once." He didn't want to divulge any more information than he had to.

"Okay..." Emilia said, disappointment heavily laden in her voice.

Subaru took Emilia's hand and turned on his heel toward the exit. He flipped a couple blessed gold coins to the merchant standing at the door. "These are for five Bokko fruits; thanks."

The merchant nodded to Subaru and counted the coins carefully as he passed by. Just before

Subaru met through the exit, he heard a gentle, but booming voice come from behind him, "Hold on you two; just one moment please."

It was Wilhelm van Astrea.

Subaru froze in place, shocked—his grip tightening on Emilia, which alarmed her. Without knowing better, she turned to face who had beckoned for them, her hands by her side and ready to cast any manner of magic in order to defend them.

"Good afternoon, my lady," Wilhelm bowed politely, before introducing himself, "I am Wilhelm van Astrea, and I couldn't help but notice your conversation with the merchant earlier. I heard you were looking for a Pyroxene crystal, am I correct?"

Subaru simply let go of her hand and awkwardly walked out the door, leaving the hooded-but-disguised Emilia alone to converse with the gentlemanly knight.

"I'm sorry, was I interrupting something?" Wilhelm asked, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Oh no, good sir," she said, giving a small but polite curtsy. "Have we met before?" The man looked oddly familiar, like this wasn't the first time they had met.

"I am Wilhelm van Astrea—formerly Wilhelm Trias," Wilhelm returned her curtsy with his own bow. "I do not believe we have met before, but I could be mistaken. Forgive me if I have forgotten who you are—well, I didn't catch your name..."

"Ah, *my* name is Lia," she introduced from behind her magical disguise. "I'm pleased to meet your acquaintance Master Wilhelm."

"Likewise," he said, adjusting his grip on the blade's hilt. "As I mentioned before, I heard you were in search for a Pyroxene crystal. It must be happenstance then, because I know where you might find one of these rare but sought-after trinkets."

"You do?" Emilia asked, her attention fully captured. "Please tell us! I desperately need one..." Emilia looked at the man with two wide, amethyst eyes, silently pleading for him to aid her.

"Many years ago, there was a cave to the north of Cramlin in the mountains of Cordor," he began, adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves. "Inside this cave, there are many lagmite crystals which have grown old and in very odd ways. Unfortunately, this cave is guarded by a Sandworm—a demon-beast of both considerable size, vitality and ferociousness. The Sandworm is typically native to the Augria Sand Dunes—but, many years ago, a family unit made its way westward and took up residence very near here. I myself had a run in with it in the past—but while one was slayed, its family members still tread. Historically, the Kingdom Knights have cautioned travelers to avoid the caverns entirely out of threat for this beast, even if such a vast amount of mana crystals does exist there."

"A Sandworm, huh?" Emilia wondered to herself. In her mind, she saw an overgrown garden worm, the kind she would see digging around in the yard of the Mathers mansion. "That doesn't sound *sooo* scary."

"Take my word for it, my lady," Wilhelm said, cautioning her. "This is no mere worm you and I would normally come across. This worm can grow to a huge size, has razor-sharp teeth, and twisted demon-horns jutting out of its brow."

"Do you think there is an easy way to defeat it?" Emilia asked, sincere in her determination. "I only ask this because, acquiring one of those crystals is of the upmost importance! You must

understand, Master Wilhelm!"

Wilhelm eyed the brown-haired girl carefully. "Admittedly, I was planning on heading out in that direction in order to search for something. Maybe our paths might cross again in the future, and I will lend you the aid of my blade."

Emilia's eyes brightened with joy. "Oh, Master Wilhelm! That would be much appreciated, and I would be in your debt!"

Giving one last gentlemanly bow, Wilhelm started for the exit. "Until next time, *My Lady*."

Intrigued at the title he had bestowed her; Emilia followed the mysterious knight out of the store and back into the cobblestoned streets of Lugnica. She looked around, but saw no sign of Wilhelm van Astrea. At a loss, she sat down against a nearby bench and thought to herself. After a moment, in the corner of her eye, she could see Subaru approaching her.

Emilia stole a glance at the young, brown-haired man in front of her—his hands were in his pockets, and he gave her a nonchalant expression. *He looks sooo cool*, she thought.

"So, what did you two talk about?" Subaru asked, as he sat next to her on the bench. "It's certainly not every day you are approached by Wilhelm van Astrea."

Emilia chuckled politely. "He didn't recognize who I was, or at least I *think* he didn't. It seems the magic of my cloak is working just as well as ever," she smiled at him, before continuing. "To think he overheard my conversation with the merchant—I never expected that."

"He overheard you?" Subaru asked, his interest growing ever still. "About the crystal, you mean?"

"Yes, he did," Emilia replied positively. "Master Wilhelm informed me of a location where we may find a crystal to house Puck. He said it was in the mountains—near a village called Cramlin—and it's even close by. Isn't that *sooo* lucky?"

Subaru smiled back at her before asking, "That sounds like a plan, but what's the catch?"

"So, you see... erm..." she paused nervously, unsure of how Subaru would respond, before continuing, "He said it was guarded by something called a Sandworm: a powerful demon-beast shaped like a worm, has horns and *oooh*, razor-sharp teeth!"

Subaru winced at that last part. "Razor-sharp teeth?!" he gasped. "You think one would mention first it has teeth sharper than daggers! What kind of worm has teeth anyway?"

Emilia giggled to herself. "Well, at first I thought it was just an oversized worm like the ones in Roswaal's garden, but Wilhelm stressed these demon-beasts are no common foe."

"You think we can defeat it?" Subaru asked—it was an honest question. "All I have is my sword, and my skill there is lacking. Of course, you could turn it into a fried worm if you wanted, but I feel bad being so useless!"

"You aren't useless, Subaru," Emilia chided, poking him in the forehead with her finger. "You are *far* from useless! You have saved me more times than I can count... and you have plenty of strength; you just don't know it yet. You need to believe in yourself, like you believe in me..." Her voice, starting out strong, grew weaker near the end.

Subaru's mouth curled mischievously. He turned to meet her amethyst eyes. "You know, Emilia, you look beautiful when you are passionate about something."

Emilia's face turned red. "Why d-did you say that?" she asked, her voice faltering. "How come you changed the subject so easily like that? We weren't talking about me—you know that!"

"Yeah, but I just felt like talking about you," Subaru admitted, unabashed and undeterred. "I can't help you're the most mesmerizing thing in this world to me. Every time I get one good look at you, I feel like I'm going to explode with passion."

Without warning, he pecked her on the cheek with a kiss, catching Emilia off guard and almost sending her falling off the bench.

"Su-Subaru!" Emilia squeaked, stumbling over her words as if her tongue was in a knot. "You know we're in public, don't you?! What do you think other people will believe if they see you kissing me in public, you pervert!"

"Pervert?" Subaru asked, his jaw dropping. "Is that the insult you always default on... and we kiss *all the time*, have you forgotten? Remember a couple weeks ago; what happened between us? I think I have earned the right to steal a kiss or two from you on occasion."

Emilia's face blossomed to a deep red at the thought of what happened between them. Even if it was a moment of pure, uncontrolled passion—it was proof she hadn't forgotten—and soon she felt herself heating up. "Subaru, it feels *sooo* hot out here, you know?" she swooned, fanning herself with her right hand gently. "I *reeeally* feel like I'm melting like a candle."

"You realize it's getting cooler as the day goes on, right?" Subaru asked, fanning her as well. "We're sitting in the shade too—it isn't going to get any cooler than this. Anyway, back to the worm-thing or whatever."

Emilia laid back against the bench in a daze from the heat. "Ah, right... yes—the *wooorm*..." she said. It appeared she was barely coherent at this point.

Subaru, noticing this, continued his questioning anyway. "Well, do you even know where to go? Come to think of it, I really need to purchase a map before we leave this place. That would help things, *a lot*."

"I have never been there myself... but I do know where to go," Emilia said, regaining her composure. "We just need to take the road south out of Lugnica, and then travel along the east road and it should take us straight to Cramlin. Wilhelm said the caverns near there were teeming with mana crystals. Which reminds me... erm... Subaru."

Noticing her hesitant voice, Subaru perked up. "What is it, Emilia?"

"There's just one problem..." Emilia started and then paused, her voice hesitant. "Master Wilhelm said he was heading in that direction as well. I'm not sure if you wanted to avoid him or not... but he said if he were in the area, he would help us with the worm."

He was going there too? he thought. If that was the case, then maybe they could use him to their advantage, but it was dangerous to be exposed for sure. He then looked at Emilia straight in the eye. "I don't think we should expose our identities to him, or anyone else we used to know," he advised pointedly. "Which reminds me, I need to let you know what has happened since the events at the Sanctuary... but I'm not sure if I can."

Emilia sat up and eyed Subaru carefully. "You can tell me Subaru, it's okay," she said, grasping his hand lovingly. "You can tell me anything—don't feel like you need to hide anything from me."

"I know I can tell you anything, but..." Subaru began, not knowing where to start. He cleared his

throat and then began again, "...In response to what happened at the Sanctuary—Crusch, Priscilla and Anastasia are all in a state of war. None of them trusted each other to begin with, and now some trust each other even less than before. They don't know who to point fingers at and blame for what happened at the Sanctuary. I overheard someone saying Wilhelm had abandoned his service to Crusch in order to search out whatever was responsible for attacking us."

"Is that so..." Emilia said, her voice low. "Master Wilhelm would do something like that for us? I don't know whether to be sad or happy."

"Yeah," Subaru said, his voice serious and unmistakable. "If that's not bad enough already, I am strictly against us revealing our identities or making it known we are still alive. I care about you, Emilia, and I want us to live long happy lives. I know you cared a lot about the Royal Selection, and you would have made a wonderful Queen, but I fear for your safety if people find out you are still alive."

Emilia just nodded, absorbing his words. "I understand, Subaru," she said, a sad smile gracing her lips. "I wish things didn't turn out this way. I wanted to help people; I really did. I mean, I guess I'm still a Royal Selection Candidate, even if I don't have the backing of Roswaal, right?"

Subaru shrugged, unsure of an answer. "I don't know for sure, but I feel like it's best we let that opportunity pass by the wayside. However, I want you to know no matter what you want to do, I will follow you, Emilia. I will be *your* knight, whether it is serving you as a Royal Selection Candidate, as a Queen, or just Emilia, the spirit-arts user. I just don't care!" His voice, subdued at the beginning, rose to almost a yell as he spoke those final words.

"Su... baru..." Emilia breathlessly said, her voice hitching. "Thank you so much for your support!" She thanked him with a smile both wide and sincere.

Unexpectedly, Emilia scooted closer to Subaru and looked up to him with tear-laden eyes. Subaru looked down at her and smiled softly, reaching an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in reassuringly. She gave him a kiss on the cheek which lingered for far longer than he thought it would. As her soft lips departed his skin, he immediately felt a cold chill replacing the warmth of her kiss. Oh, how he wanted her to be attached to him forever like that, and to never leave his skin.

His hand went to touch the place where her lips had just been. "Emilia?" he spoke, a loss of words stifling his ability to speak. "Thanks for the kiss..."

The gratitude was welcomed but unneeded. "Subaru, there will be many more from where that came from." Her voice was both playful and filled with love. "But to respond to what you said... for now, I think we should just go on our way and stay out of the politics of Lugnica. I agree with what you said, that bringing us back into the thick of things would cause more trouble than fix it. As much as I feel so terrible for putting Lady Crusch and the others through this, I don't want to bring us anymore harm. Right now, I just want to focus on *us*, Subaru."

When Subaru heard that last sentence, he almost died. He thought he would never hear something like that from Emilia, ever. In just a couple weeks, she had already matured beyond her past self, not only emotionally, but mentally, too. Her admission that herself being included in the Royal Selection created danger for herself and everyone around her—her decision to focus on just themselves. Quite frankly, Subaru wanted to kiss her again right here and now... but he didn't.

"You really think so, Emilia?" Subaru asked, turning to Emilia.

"Yes, with all my heart," she said, truly meaning it. "I think for now, we have enough to worry about with just us two, *together*. We should go our own path and see where it leads us. Before, I

was just being led by Roswaal after being convinced to take part in the Royal Selection—but now, I want to do what I truly want to do... and that is be with *you*, Subaru."

Subaru simply looked at her with wide, unblinking eyes. He didn't know what to think at this point—his mind was filled with emotion, confusion, and hesitation. Without a word, he reached out a hand to touch her cheek, and he felt the smoothness of her silky skin. Returning the gesture, she wrapped both of her hands around his own and pressed her face against him.

"I love you, Emilia," Subaru whispered to her, almost soundlessly, his mouth close to her ear. "You know how important you are to me—I would do *anything* to make you happy. I'm comfortable with any decision you make, please know that."

"I know," Emilia said, her voice barely a whisper and filled with love. "You are *sooo* amazing, Subaru. I'm *sooo* glad you found me—I don't know what I would do without you. Without you, I would still be lost, unhappy, and alone. I didn't want to realize it, but I now know why Puck broke his contract with me: he did it so I could realize my love for you. He truly wanted me to be happy, and that's why we need to get him back." After this realization, Emilia let out a deep sigh into Subaru's neck, releasing her stress.

By now, the Lugnic sun was starting to set behind the castle walls, basking the surrounding area in a vivid orangish color. The ground-dragons which had previously covered the expanse of the main road had started to dwindle in number, signifying the day was truly near its end. Likewise, the hustle and bustle from earlier had shrunk to a lower number, leaving just vagabonds and wayfarers travelling to and from their destinations.

The two sat comfortably together for some time on the bench, before one of them stirred.

Subaru stretched out his arms and yawned, before saying, "It looks like things are dying down around here. It was a nice afternoon; what do you say to turning in for the night, before making the trek to Cramlin village tomorrow?"

Emilia, perking up in response to him, said, "Oh, Subaru? You *reeeally* mean that? We are going to Cramlin village tomorrow?" She was surprised he was so receptive to her idea, even when considering Wilhelm was heading there as well.

"Seeing as I miss that fuzzy little cat as much as you do," Subaru said, smiling to Emilia. "I just figured we should take our next lead in our quest for getting him back, don't you think?"

Emilia nodded ferociously. "Oh, yes! I bet Puck would be *sooo* happy to see you, Subaru. He will be so proud you have taken care of me so well—I'm sure of it."

Yeah, I'm sure of it, he thought. Truthfully, he had a bone to pick with that mischievous little fuzzball of a cat. His actions, or lack thereof, had put Emilia in more danger than the Great Spirit probably thought. Even though Puck wasn't responsible for the events which happened at the Sanctuary, Subaru would have a difficult time forgiving him for mental stress and emotional damage he had caused Emilia. Even so, if Emilia wanted to get her pseudo-father back, then he would do everything in his power to aid her—that's just the kind of oath he took: to serve, and protect her, even die for her if needed.

He really hoped that last part wouldn't be necessary.

"Well, that settles it, then—let's head back to the tavern and get some rest. Then tomorrow, we set out for Cramlin village, and then put the worm to the test."

Emilia looked up at him once more with eyes which were clearly deeply in love. It almost scared Subaru how quickly she had fallen with him, now that she was alone with him. Of course, he didn't want to argue with how love worked, but something bothered him, probably since he realized she would have never fallen for him this fast if the events at the Sanctuary didn't happen as they did.

Brushing those thoughts from his mind, he tugged on her hood, pulling it further over her silver-threaded hair.

"Ow... Subaru, what was that for?" Emilia complained, looking up at him.

"If you stare at me too long, Emilia, you might catch a cold," Subaru said, laughing softly to himself. "I've been known to have that effect on people."

"I-I wasn't staring," Emilia said, her cheeks growing red once more. "*You* were staring at *me*!"

The two stared at each other momentarily in silence... and then shared a long, joyous laugh. It was times like these the two would cherish in the future to come. In recent weeks, there wasn't a whole lot of chance or time for laughter like the two shared now. It was a pure, unabated laughter which didn't show any signs of underlying stress or discomfort. It was quite simply happiness—*pure happiness*.

Subaru grinned at Emilia, who returned with a simple smile. She turned her head inquisitively at the man who was assaulting her with his big toothy grin. After a moment of taking in every detail of his battle-worn face, she recognized something extraordinary.

Emilia realized smiling changed Subaru's face significantly—realizing that lately, he hadn't been smiling very often. From now on, she would make it her priority to protect his smile, just as he spent every fiber of his being to protect her.

Both Subaru and Emilia were thinking about one another as they walked, hand-in-hand through the streets of Lugnica, disappearing into the warm, summer night.

Part Two - The Search Begins

*In the misty lights of dawn
Between heart and soul
Elgard's calling for new hope
To avoid our fall*

Three days later, on the back end of the red-sun season when the leaves began to show their waning colors, they found themselves on an unfamiliar road.

All the while, Subaru had been gazing at the vast mountain range towering over him in awe. They were far from it—maybe a day's travel—but that didn't stop it from blanketing the road and surrounding woodland in its shadow as the sun passed behind it. The only thing he could compare it with was Mount Fuji, a mountain in the otherworld where he hailed from—but even it paled in comparison, as this was something else entirely. The peak of its highest mountain rose so tall it tore the sky asunder, cloaking itself in a veil of clouds so it was unable to be seen.

It was now late in the day. To the west, over the horizon, was the capital city of Lugnica, and to their east, the unmistakable expanse of Mount Cordor.

The sun setting over the mountain was not a signal of the day's end, but a testament to just how vast it was, and as it crept lower and lower, the snow-tipped peaks of the mountain shone with a beacon of light radiantly. Subaru could just barely make out the smoke billowing from the mining village of Cramlin, which rested just above the base of the mountain itself, as well as the winding crags and pathways which snaked in and around the mountain—pathways no doubt perilous to traverse.

Since the pair had left the capital, their journey had been safe and relatively uneventful. Before departing, Subaru had purchased a detailed map of the land—a tool which would unmistakably aid them in their journey. From here to the village of Cramlin, there was nothing but a strong stretch of uninhabited land; a wilderness which could be identified only by the markings of forests, rivers, and green plains on the map. Even though Subaru could see the mountain and village from where they walked, they were probably still hours from reaching their destination, maybe even an entire day if they ran into any problems.

Dragging his gaze from the mountain ranges in front of him, Subaru turned his attention to his silver-haired partner who tread quietly beside him. Her dazzling ashen hair blew gently in the first winds of the yellow-sun, and a level of peacefulness graced her soft features more beautifully than ever before. Subaru must have been staring too long, because Emilia noticed, causing her lips to curve into a bashful smile.

"You're staring again," she pointed out from behind a playful and teasing glint in her eye. "You have been doing that so often, Subaru! You know how I can't handle you looking at me for too long, it's *veeery* embarrassing—and I can't just ignore you."

Subaru returned her smile. "It's just how I want to spend my free-time in these peaceful moments like this," he said, adjusting the blade which hung at his side. "Looking at your face always puts me in a super good mood, and that's just what I want to be in right now."

Emilia's face reddened to a shade not unlike a beet. "Looking at my face?! When you put it that way, it's so... never mind. But you always used to stare at me when we first met—you had perverted intentions? I thought you were just weird and it's something normal from the land you came from, so I let it pass."

"It's not perverted if we are a couple," Subaru said, laughter threatening to escape his voice. "In fact, where I come from, it's normal for couples to stare at each other for hours on end! It just means I'm deeply infatuated with you, that's all."

"Very well," said Emilia.

Without warning, she ceased her walking, and in a sudden movement, she turned and locked eyes with him, lilac to hazel.

Catching Subaru off guard, he almost jumped back in surprise. "E-Emilia!" he squeaked, confusion laden in his stutter. "What a-are you doing?"

"I'm staring," she answered, pointedly at that as her eyes bore a hole into his head. "I have to be honest, I never really looked at you like this before, Subaru. I never noticed how amazing your eyes are... and when I'm looking at them this closely—there are so many different colors in them! It's *sooo* cool."

Taken aback at her sincerity, Subaru blinked in astonishment, and in response to her dare, he returned her gaze just as determinedly. He had brought this on himself, and he couldn't back away now, especially after those words of love she just showered him with.

"You won't make me back down," Subaru said defiantly, accepting her challenge. "No matter how beautiful you are, I can stare into those mystical pools of lavender forever! Mark my words."

"Mystical pools of lavender?" Emilia asked, questioning his eccentric choice of words. "And you have the nerve to say I talk in a funny way. Well, I guess you have been picking up a thing or two from me, then. You know, that's *sooo* cute—really Subaru, I'm beyond flattered by you."

He just gawked at Emilia who continued to stare down at him triumphantly. Subaru said, "That was quite the compliment. I couldn't imagine a time when you would finally accept my incessant staring, and that makes me truly happy, little Emilia!"

"You're going to have to give me a little bit more time on the pet names," Emilia said, while letting a polite laugh escape her lips. "I always just tolerated it before because you're just so odd, but honestly, I couldn't feel the same about you if you weren't just the way you are!"

Her soft and pure voice was like music to his ears, and when she laughed, it threatened to drown him in a sea of pure happiness. Every word spoken from her, every emotion displayed, was genuine beyond compare. That was who Emilia was, and her authenticity was unmatched by anyone he had ever met.

Just then, another gentle breeze blew through the air, capturing her long silver hair in its grasp. He couldn't hide how far he had fallen in love with her. His eyes, brimming with tears at any moment from the emotion said it all, and she stared at him, reading his every thought as if she was the mind-reading Puck.

He held out his hand for her and said, "I would love to stare at you until the end of time, my little Emilia—but we need to be on our way."

"Yes, well," she said plainly, taking his hand. "There will be plenty more time for staring in the future, I'm sure of it!"

Subaru nodded happily and turned down road again. "You know exactly what I want to hear now, don't you?" Subaru asked suddenly as they walked hand in hand. "There was a time when I thought I would never hear these wonderful words coming from the love of my life!"

Emilia couldn't stifle the laugh which followed. "Oh, please, you are so ridiculous! Sometimes I can't take you seriously, especially when you are doting on me like some fair maiden who's locked up in some forgotten castle!"

"That's exactly what you are to me, though," Subaru admitted with no reluctance in his speech, before continuing, "Oh, my fair maiden, hear this: my bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite!" Subaru's voice was almost a parody of his own jovial self.

Emilia, beside him, chuckled. Subaru felt as if his heart was going to implode if he heard that amazingly cute laugh once more. It was a pure sound he wanted to wake up to every morning until the end of his days.

"You really are beginning to talk like me, aren't you?" Emilia stated, as her hand raised to her mouth to stifle yet another laugh. "Where did you learn to speak like that?"

"It's a quote from a tragedy of love from the land where I'm from," Subaru said, a sudden realization growing on his face. "Oh... wait."

Subaru realized quoting from a romantic tragedy which resulted in the death of the two titular star-crossed lovers was probably not the most romantic thing ever—but Emilia didn't need to know that.

"A tragedy, huh?" Emilia queried, her interest piqued. "So, you think our relationship is a *tragedy*, huh?! Subaru, I'm *veeery* disappointed in you. You know I want our love to have a happy ending, don't you? I think we have had enough sadness in our lives; it's time to stretch out and enjoy the goodness the world has to offer us! We shouldn't have to live our life constantly watching our backs for danger, no matter what we do—it's just not fair."

Subaru realized his lack of tact might have led this lighthearted conversation to a far more serious one yet again. Mentally, he scolded himself for having the commonsense, or lack thereof, of an average shut-in with no life experience.

He sighed, with the burden of two worlds on his shoulders. "I know exactly what you mean, Emilia," he said, his tone lower and weightier than before. "We're going to have a happy ending, I'm sure of it..." He wanted to say more, but for some reason, he suddenly lost the power of speech.

Emilia stared at the space between her two feet as she walked along the dirt road, silently pondering on what their future together had in store for them—and then she looked to her left. Suddenly, her breath hitched, and for a moment the rise and fall of her chest came to an unexpected halt.

Concern painted indiscriminately over her soft features in response at what she saw: Subaru's expression was unusually grave, and his brow was furrowed in anxiety indicating he wasn't well—indeed, *something* was bothering him.

In a knee-jerk reaction, her frail hand tensed around his own, wrenching him from his silent and solitary ruminations. Returning to the world of the living, Subaru locked eyes with her once more, and he scrutinized her with his gaze.

Emilia said nothing, but she allowed him to prod her silently with his hazel eyes.

"Is there something wrong, Emilia?" There was real worry in Subaru's voice. "If we're in danger,

you need to tell me."

Subaru looked around quickly, scanning his surroundings in fear. His grip on Emilia's hand tightened as his overprotective nature took hold of him once more, and after checking the plains, he turned his eye toward the dark woods just across the trickling stream adjacent to them.

His eyes narrowed, as he strained himself to see the unseeable. "I don't see anything..." he trailed off, continuing his investigations, before continuing, "Come, let's get off the road..."

He spoke this last sentence as an order directly to Emilia, who still stood silently next to him, her visage elegant but expressionless. After he gave her a tug and she did not budge, she finally granted him a response, though indelicate in her delivery. "There's no danger, Subaru... and I'm not worried about myself right now—I'm worried about *you*."

After giving their surroundings one final once-over, Subaru looked over to the half-elf who gave him such confusing signals. By now, she had her hands on her hips as if she was upset at him, but otherwise, her expression was difficult to read.

"No danger...? Well, why are you worried about me?" Subaru pushed verbally, as he walked up to her suddenly, a hint of anger lacing his pointed words. "I thought we were in some sort of danger, Emilia. Isn't that the norm for us? By the way you're acting, it's almost like you think it's unnatural for me to be this way—well, I got news for you..."

"Listen to how you are speaking to me!" Emilia interrupted in her defense. "I barely gave you the slightest hint of anything, and this is how you respond! That's how I know there is something wrong with you, Subaru."

And that, Subaru did not expect at all. When he heard the accusations emerging from her soft lips, they stuck into him deeper than the sharpest dagger. Mentally incapacitated, he stepped back in shock.

She closed the distance, making sure he couldn't avoid her anymore. "Don't walk away from me, Subaru." she pleaded, as every gentle step she took thundered like a giant to him. "I'm not angry at you... I'm just concerned, that's all. I see how you carry yourself, how you try to carry the world on your shoulders like it's your burden to bear! I don't want you to carry it by yourself, so let me help you—I'll even shoulder you if it comes to that!"

It was spoken with worry and love. Surely, he could have denied her allegations, or even outright ignored them. But Subaru had made his decision to put Emilia beyond himself, and if she wanted such things, then he would oblige her.

"Am I that easy to read...?" Emilia heard his voice, barely above a whisper in the evening winds. "I'm really sorry, Emilia. I keep doing things I promise myself I would never do again, and for that, I'm truly sorry."

She could tell from his half-broken voice he was hurt, and hurting was all they'd endured for the past few weeks.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Emilia consoled him gently. "I was only trying to show you I am here for you. I know you walk with the weight of not only yourself, but mine as well—which is why I want to be there for you like you are for me. Remember what I said before, just a couple days ago? I want to walk *beside* you, not *behind* you—that means in every way: as your partner, your friend, when we laugh, when we argue, and when we cry—and most of all, as your lover."

Subaru finally understood, as her gentle words reassured him in the most effective way. His solemn expression curved into a weak smile bearing a mixture of emotions; both sad and happy.

Emilia noticed this, and his weakened smile threatened to turn her into an emotional mess. She wanted nothing but for him to be happy, and it pained her to see him continuing to shoulder such an emotional burden because of her—but this time she did not cry, and nor did he.

For a moment, no one spoke. The two just stared at each other, absorbing the emotions dancing across the endless oceans of their eyes. Subaru saw Emilia cared about him more deeply than he could ever possibly understand, and so gently, he rose his hand to cup her cheek in the most passionate way he could.

"A happily ever after?" he said, his voice cutting their shared silence as light cut effortlessly through darkness. "Now that's something I could look forward to!"

"I can't wait for that future!" Emilia said, her own subdued smile curving into a joyful one. "A future with the one whom I love! Subaru, I *reeeally* love you so much," she said cheerfully. "These past weeks, they have made me realize there isn't anyone else in all of Lugnica or the rest of the land I would want to spend my time with more."

"You can say that again," Subaru murmured, as he moved closer to her, their faces barely inches from one another. "It's amazing that through all of these trials and tribulations thrown our way, our love continues, and has even grown deeper than it was before. I was so sure... so sure I loved you before, but now, it's almost different. The protectiveness, it was always there, but now I can see past my own selfish desires and realize our love is something bigger than just me. It's about *us*, Emilia."

Emilia was speechless, and she could feel his hot breath tickling her nose, as he uttered the final words:

"It's not my love," he corrected, his mouth closing in on hers for a climax. "It's *our* love."

Subaru craned his neck downward and their lips met fiercely for what felt like the first time. Emilia, caught off guard, pushed herself against him in order to keep herself from falling backwards from the ferociousness of his kiss. Moments passed, and Emilia forgot she could breathe through her nose—soon, she needed to get some air. Briefly, her lips separated from his own in a desperate attempt to suck a breath in, but Subaru continued his advancement on her lips.

"Oh, Emilia—!" he breathed into her moan as her clammy fingers wrapped possessively around his neck.

Too soon, their lips parted, and she settled against him, almost limp in his arms.

Truthfully, their current location wasn't the most ideal area for a heated lovemaking session—especially in the middle of the road. They hadn't seen any travelers recently, but they'd leave themselves exposed to all sorts of nasty rumors and embarrassment if someone caught them like this in the heat of the moment.

Rumors? he thought, almost laughing. He didn't care about any of that.

"Su-Subaru..." Emilia said breathlessly, as she pushed off him and fixed her disheveled appearance. "That was so... unexpected. It's been a while since we kissed like that, hasn't it?"

"Yeah..." he replied shortly. He was great with words right now, especially when his higher brain functions hadn't fully regained control yet. "I mean... uh, yeah. Sorry about that, I guess?"

Emilia's reddened cheeks were beginning to return to their normal shade of pink. The amount of blood rushing earlier to her face almost sent her into a daze.

She ran her hands through her long, silver-thread hair, and let out a huff. "Sorry?" she pouted, her voice clearly in a temper, and an angry one at that. "You almost tackled me to the ground!"

"I just can't help myself!" he complained, crossing his arms defiantly. "You're lucky we are standing in the middle of the road—very lucky, in fact."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Emilia said, her mouth gaping open in shock. "Subaru, you are such a pervert sometimes!" Slowly, her expression of shock turned to one of bashfulness. "And I know I haven't mentioned this before, but you haven't gotten me drunk enough for something like *that* to happen again. I mean... Oh, forget it. Just think about our future, Subaru! We are in no position to take care of a baby right now! Imagine what Puck would do to you if he found out there was a baby in my tummy! He always told me to be careful around other men... I just didn't expect he meant be careful around *you*!"

Subaru heard what sounded like a cough or a sneeze, and he could see Emilia rubbing her belly possessively as if she were already pregnant.

Wait, what...? he thought. "Don't tell me..." Subaru then said, as he brought his palm to his face in complete embarrassment.

"I mean, I feel the same," Emilia said, as she raised her hand to her forehead to feel her temperature. "I don't feel too hot, and I don't feel like there's a baby in there... Wait, are you okay Subaru?"

The mortification on Subaru's face was plain for anyone to see. It wasn't one at the fact he didn't want a baby with Emilia, oh no—never that, as he wanted to have a dozen kids with her. It was mortification that in his stupidity, he might have brought something upon them they both weren't ready for—*parenthood*.

"Ah, Subaru, you idiot!" he scolded himself in front of her as if she wasn't there. "You idiot, you idiot, you idiot!"

Emilia just stared at him as he reprimanded himself for something she didn't quite understand. After a minute, she walked up to him and took his hand, snaked it up under her undershirt and pressed it to her belly. The warmth of her skin filled him with peace and tranquility.

"Do you feel anything in there?" she asked, her voice so soft it almost couldn't be heard. "I can't feel anything, and the lesser spirits haven't told me yet. Usually, they share all kinds of secrets with me..."

Subaru blinked. "Well..." he said, as he centered all his being onto her soft belly. "I can't say, honestly. I don't have the ability to sense things like that, or at least I think I don't..."

Emilia looked at him with worry, and she gave his hand a little squeeze. Subaru looked back up to her and clashed eyes with her once more. Her spiraled amethyst eyes narrowed and bore holes into his own coffee-colored eyes. She was speaking to him, and not verbally.

An immense wave of relief washed over him as if he was soaking up the ocean surge on a warm summer beach. *All signs are pointing to her not being pregnant*, he thought.

It wasn't that he didn't want children with her, it's just they simply weren't ready—especially now they were vagabonds on the road with no roof over their head. It would be some time before he

would even consider the thought of conceiving a child with her, accidentally or not. Next time, if they ever copulated, he would be more careful than he was before—and sober.

He looked down at his lover who stood silently in front of him. Her expression was one of... sadness? Was she disappointed she might not be with child? His concerned eyes relaxed to a more compassionate state as he inched his fingers under her chin, tilting her upward to meet his gaze.

Subaru did not speak, but Emilia understood every word those beautiful brown eyes were conveying to her in its absence. He told her not to worry, and told her one day, when they were ready, they would share a child together—a child born from love.

Emilia swallowed, and she nodded to him, accepting his solemn vow for what it was: a declaration from the heart.

After a while, the two departed their embrace, and continued their way down the pathway toward Cramlin village. By now, the evening sun began to dim, a subtle orange glow replacing it. Soon, it would be nighttime, and in these wilds, their environment would no doubt become dangerous.

By this time, Subaru was mentally scolding himself for not purchasing a ground-dragon for them to ride. They would have been in Cramlin by now, maybe even by yesterday. Next time they were in Lugnica, they would make the stables their first stop and purchase one immediately.

By late evening, the sun had finally fizzled out, and now their pathway was lit by the translucent moon which hung peacefully overhead. Still, they had seen no travelers coming or going from either direction, which Subaru found to be more than odd. Even though he treasured the fact they were left alone, he always felt odd in the stomach when things were *too* quiet.

Subaru stole a glance at Emilia who followed just beside him. For quite some time now, he had been ruminating on what transpired earlier. The young half-elf had clearly been disappointed she might not be pregnant with his child. If he were honest with himself, he feared something monumental like that happening between him and Emilia. Even if the events from that night were almost lost to him, fueled by mead and a deeper passion than the two had ever shared—the butterfly effect sending shockwaves through their relationship still echoed even now. He found himself hoping, that one day, the two would settle down peacefully, enjoying their adulthood together hand-in-hand, their budding relationship growing organically as it should.

For now, however, he had other things to worry about.

As if on cue to that thought, Emilia's voice ripped him from his introspection, and he looked up ahead.

"Look, Subaru!" she called, her voice more panicked than usual. She pointed straight down the dirt road which they travelled, where a small fire burned, smoke billowing from it high into the sky.

"Get down," he hissed, motioning for Emilia to get down and off the road. "I don't want us to be spotted by whatever is over there."

Subaru crouched low to the ground and crept over in the darkness. His right hand lay on the pommel of his sheathed sword, ready to draw in the case of emergency. Likewise, Emilia was beside him, her mind acute and hands readied to cast any manner of spell.

As the two trudged closer and closer to the fire, the situation became quite clear; just ahead was the burning remains of a military caravan, adorned with the insignia of the Divine Dragon. Strewn about the area were corpses, and not just any corpses; their white capes with red trim flapped

somberly against the evening winds—they were Kingdom Knights.

Realizing this, Emilia covered her mouth with her hand in shock. "Oh, no!" she gasped, her voice trembling in terror. "Who could have done this?!"

A cold chill sent shockwaves down Subaru's spine, and it rendered him undeniably speechless. If the Kingdom Knights were no match for this foe, they wouldn't fair well either. He turned his head to look behind him, wondering if they should travel in the other direction to get away from here—and *fast*.

Subaru looked forward again, and he met eyes with Emilia who looked up at him with worried eyes. Her lips were trembling, not in fear, but in sadness for the Kingdom Knights who had been slain and discarded upon the ground like mere cattle.

"I don't know," Subaru said plainly, his voice dark and grave. "But what I do know is, whoever did it must be strong enough to fight people who are significantly stronger than we are. We need to get away from here, Emilia."

She nodded in agreement, not willing to argue against that logic. There was a time and place for everything, and fighting something as powerful as this was not one of those situations. She didn't want to risk bringing any harm to Subaru, or herself.

"I think we should still go to Cramlin," Emilia said evenly, as she peered over the nook. "We are so close, and it's not that far from here. While we are there, we can let the authorities know what happened so they can send word to the capital. There should be a Kingdom Knights outpost there, as there is in every village under the domain and protection of Lugnica."

Subaru sighed heavily. He wished he was a physically stronger man. If only he had the power to protect those he loved so dearly and make it so they wouldn't be afraid of anything. In his current state, he had only the skills and ability to defend themselves from the most basic of foes. Even now, it was all he could do to prevent his hand from trembling in terror as it was right now.

Struggling to regain his composure, Subaru said, "Let's go around that brush there." He pointed toward a concealed area which they would be hidden under the dark of the night. "If we go around, we shouldn't run into any problems."

Silently acknowledging him, Emilia followed Subaru into the darkness. Carefully, they stepped, trying their hardest not to step on a stray twig or produce any other sound which could give them away. It was difficult, since they couldn't even see two feet in front of them from the darkness.

Suddenly, Emilia bumped unexpectedly into the back of Subaru—he had stopped moving.

Rubbing her head gingerly, she peered around his shoulder. "What is it, Subaru?" Emilia asked quietly. She couldn't see anything other than the smoldering smoke pouring from the fires of the caravan.

Subaru raised an unsteady left hand, motioning for her to cease all movement and voice. His steady gaze was pointed unwaveringly in the direction of the caravan. For a moment, they sat there, still and unmoving as if they were both long-forgotten statues in an overgrown wood.

Emilia stayed still, unwilling to give into curiosity... until she caught something in the corner of her eye—Subaru's hands were trembling uncontrollably. She reached out to grab his shaking hand and she gave it a tight squeeze, pulling Subaru's attention away from whatever was in front of him. They made eye contact for a moment, and in those quick seconds, she felt every ounce of fear and

horror as he did. She stood up a little and peered over Subaru's shoulder, in the direction of the caravan.

There, jutting out from one of the gutted corpses of what remained of a Kingdom Knight, was a large and distinct dagger with maroon markings in the center of it. Undoubtedly, it was the unquestionable dagger of a witch cultist.

Subaru heard a sound, and realized moments later Emilia was whimpering behind him. Likewise, he fought hard against his own will to keep the fear from shutting his body down. The mere notion witch cultists were in the area threatened to send him into a panic-induced coma. He had only assumed the recent events they took part in were the Witch Cult's work, but he really didn't want to know for sure. He sought nothing other than to remove himself from their diabolical business and to stray in a direction opposite of their own—simply for the safety of the half-elf whimpering in fear just next to him.

He hated the witch cultists, and would slaughter the whole lot of them if he had the power to do so. And to think they would do something so brazen as to murder a whole caravan of Kingdom Knights. Come to think of it... the recent disappearances, the burning of Nicia, the cursed wood, and the missing envoys—they were all connected, and no doubt to the Witch Cult. *What were they planning?* he thought.

Abruptly, out of the darkness, he heard another sound echoing through the starry night sky. At first it was faint, but as it got closer, he recognized what it was: the unmistakable pounding of a ground-dragon's claws against the hard dirt.

Getting lower to the ground in response to the intruding party, he waited patiently for who was to arrive and witness the ghastly scene in front of them. Judging from the echo of the gallop, they were getting close. Suddenly, the gallop ceased, and the ground-dragon came into view—it was an Earth Dragon, and a shockingly familiar one at that.

Patrasche?! he thought, his eyes widening. *Wait... then that means...*

As if on cue, the older white-haired gentleman dismounted from his ground-dragon with a thud, landing unceremoniously on the dirt roadway.

"Wilhelm?" Subaru whispered, his voice quiet enough no one would hear him.

With his hands resting calmly by his side, Wilhelm walked up to the blazing fire and analyzed his surroundings carefully. His stern expression, while clear he felt no fear, gave credence to the seriousness of the situation at hand. Attentively, he knelt beside one of the corpses and checked for vital signs. He frowned and closed his eyes solemnly before removing the blade protruding out of the back of the corpse. With curiosity, he examined the blade and returned to Patrasche in order to stow it for safe keeping.

Unexpectedly, Wilhelm turned toward the wood where Subaru and Emilia lay just under the brush. His hand shot to the pommel of his blade in a reflex too fast for a normal eye to see, and he readied himself in a battle stance, scanning the darkened woods for any life—friend or foe.

In response, Patrasche let out a yell which sent a reverberating echo into the dark of the night, no doubt reaching for miles on end. Silence followed, and the ground-dragon gave Wilhelm an approving purr. Even still, the ever-careful Wilhelm continued to observe his surroundings until the threat he sensed was spotted.

Yet, he saw nothing; soon, his calm demeanor returned, and he ceased his battle-ready stance.

Gathering himself once more, Wilhelm mounted Patrasche once more with ease and with a click of his reins, he dashed into the darkness toward Cramlin until all traces of him vanished from sight.

Realizing it was now safe to expose himself, Subaru wordlessly stood and took Emilia by her hand. Gently, he tugged, indicating it was time to go.

Obediently, and without question, she followed his lead. This was one of those times when no words needed to be exchanged—she knew exactly what needed to be done and nothing else was required. For now, they would stay off the road as to avoid any more unwanted attention—and as for Wilhelm van Astrea, it wasn't a question of if they would meet him, but *when*. This peculiar situation they had placed themselves in was difficult to digest indeed. Ideally, if they had two magic concealment cloaks, they could both hide their appearance from him, and all the better for it—but that wasn't the case, since they only had Emilia's cat-eared cloak.

Subaru had similar thoughts. Not only were the surrounding events making more sense now the Witch Cult was involved, but their inaction was leading to more deaths and destruction. Morally, they were at a crossroads now. Of course, they should report such occurrences to the respective authorities, but giving such information would no doubt lead to their identities being exposed. Names had to be attached to intelligence such as the burning of a village, the massacre of government officials—and the list goes on and on.

At this point in time, and as selfish as he might be—he only cared about Emilia. For all he cared, the witch cultists could burn down the entire city of Lugnica before he put her in harm's way again. He was probably the worst person in the world for thinking that way, but such selfish ways of thought were the only way he could keep her from getting hurt any further. But Emilia did not think that way—and he knew that. He knew in her goodwill, she would want to go to the authorities to explain what they have witnessed, putting herself in danger once more...

...he only wished she would make the right choice.

Gradually, with only the moonlight to guide their way, the pair made their travels through the woods and up the winding pathways which led deep into the mountain. As they ventured higher and higher, the growing incline strained both of their bodies almost to their breaking point. Luckily enough, Cramlin wasn't so far up the mountain they had to exert themselves any longer. In their tribulations, they had come closer and closer to Cramlin, and before long, they found themselves in front of a towering wooden gate, much unlike the one from Nicia.

By now, Emilia had tucked her long, silver-flowing hair into her cat-eared hood—her curious pointy ears concealed from the view of regular humans.

Two village guards were posted in front; halberds reaching high into the sky, barring entry to any vagabond or wayfarer who found themselves in front of the large towering gate.

"Halt—!"

The guards bellowed in unison, and then presented their arms formally in front of them, beckoning a response from the two travelers.

"There has been word of unusual activity in the domain of Cordor," the left guard asked, "What business do you have in the village of Cramlin?"

Subaru stepped up and replied, "We have been traveling for three days from the capital city of Lugnica. We are tired from travel and were just seeking shelter in order to recuperate and continue our travels toward the east."

"Eastward, you say?" the right guard questioned curiously. "What business do you have in the Eastlands? We don't get many travelers on these roads who go beyond the Hyclara Plateau."

"If you really want to know," Subaru replied coolly, as he gestured to the east. "We are making our way into the city of Flanders, as we have business to attend to there."

"Is that so..." the guard hummed. He stood there silently for a moment, pondering on whether to believe him or not. After a moment, he motioned to his partner and decided, "Well, I don't see anything wrong with letting you stay for a day or two. I do hope you enjoy your stay in the most famous mining village in all Lugnica!"

The guard gave a signal to the watchtower above, and soon a loud cracking sound filled the air. Unlatching—gradually, and very slowly, the monstrous gate began to gape itself open. The two guards both conducted an about-face and then marched into the village. Two additional guards exited from the gate and marched toward the entrance, their metal plated boots trodding the damp mud below them.

The changing of the guard? he wondered as they came out. He looked over to Emilia and shot her a reassuring smile, to which she returned more than kindly with her own. Her features, while always graceful and elegant, were no doubt tired from the couple days of travel they had endured. It was time they got some much-needed rest in preparation for their next adventure in the morning.

As the pair entered through the gate, they were met with something they did not expect—the village was immense.

It wasn't a village, no—it *was* a *city*. It was like something you would see in a fantasy novel about dwarves. The village itself extended and was built deep inside the mountains. Within the crooks and crags, lay homes burrowed deep almost in tandem, growing out of the mountain like flowers. Even though it was nighttime, traders lined the bottom levels of the village, peddling their goods to customers both humans and demi-humans alike. Unlike other villages Subaru had been to, there was a growing nightlife typically found only in the capital.

Indeed, this was a mining village—and it was proven to be so due to the massive harvesting structure jutting out of the numerous caverns overhanging the village; a tool used to transport precious gems, coal, and other materials you would otherwise find deep inside a sprawling mountain. The main terrace itself was adorned and sculpted to perfection, and the surrounding buildings were made of stone, brick and mortar.

Subaru and Emilia walked along the main walkways of the village, their eyes wide in wonder like little children in a magic store. Subaru was just a fraction ahead of Emilia, but their distance grew further as felt her gaze dashing from merchant stand to merchant stand.

She had never been this far to the east before. This was just as much of an alien environment as it was to Subaru, who was just as excited as she was. In her sheltered days, she would never have made such a trek so far past the capital like this. Luckily, she had brought a large amount of gold with her—and no doubt they would spend every last piece of it here.

Suddenly, the pair heard shouting coming from a wide-open expanse just past the marketplace. A large crowd was gathering there, just in front of a raised platform. As Subaru and Emilia pushed themselves through the crowd, they were able to see who was on the platform itself. It was three Kingdom Knights, one who donned a black hood and a large battle-axe, and then a lonesome man who had been stripped of his clothing down to his bare skin, bruised and clearly injured.

The roaring of the horde grew louder and louder, before it resonated high into the night sky and

bounced off the winding and overhanging crooked mountain. Without warning, one of the Kingdom Knights rose his hand, silencing the crowd and announced:

"It is my pleasure and honor to oversee this public execution as it takes place in the most customary of ways," he said, his voice resolute and judgmental. "It is my duty as a Kingdom Knight; a soldier who has taken a solemn oath before the Divine Dragon himself, to render this justice in the eyes of the common people." The Kingdom Knight cleared his throat before continuing, "We meet on this somber occasion to render justice on a criminal whose worth is no less than that of a common rat, and he will be remembered as such."

Small murmuring amongst the populace turned into a roaring thunder of clapping and whistling as the Kingdom Knight finished the beginning of his speech. Subaru and Emilia just observed the spectacle from the backrows in quiet wonder.

"Quiet please, everyone," the Kingdom Knight chided the unruly crowd. He then unfolded a large scroll, and read, "So, we shall begin to serve the sentence accordingly—the accused stands guilty of the following crimes: high treason against the Divine Dragon, the practicing and adherence to the Witch Cult..."

Subaru turned to Emilia and whispered, "He's a Witch Cult member? They must have been onto their plot after all."

Emilia nodded gingerly and turned her attention back to the spectacle.

"...The acts of murder, unlawful execution of citizens protected under the Divine Dragon, burglary, kidnapping, and an innumerable amount of petty crimes which cannot be accounted for."

The Kingdom Knight furled the scroll back up and handed it to the knight which stood beside him. Turning to face the man accused of being a witch cultist, he rhetorically asked, "Is there anything you want to tell the Divine Dragon before you depart this world?"

The naked man looked at the Kingdom Knight, and then to the crowd. He was expressionless, save for the horrendous swelling on his face which made him appear to be smiling, even if he wasn't. He shook his head negatively and knelt next to the execution block, signifying he was ready to go.

The hooded Kingdom Knight hardened his stance, and then raised his heavy battle-axe far above his head in an effortless motion which showed both skill and strength. Quickly, he swung the axe down, letting its weight and momentum add to the killing blow. Cold steel cracked against damp wood.

Collectively, the crowd gasped, and the man's head fell into the basket as his lifeblood spilt from his lifeless corpse.

Now that the spectacle was all but over, the crowd began to depart at a rapid pace—leaving Subaru and Emilia standing there, wondering what had just happened.

Subaru had never seen a public execution like this before, but he did read about them in the history books. The executions of history were usually brutal, torturing the accused individual before giving him a slow, agonizing death. This execution, however, was swift, and the accused did not suffer. His respect for the Kingdom Knights began to grow even more as he realized how vast and expansive their duties were—and the sanctity of duty to uphold their oath was admirable indeed.

Looking up at the twinkling moon overhead, Subaru decided it was probably time for them to turn in for the night. As much as he wanted to spend the night wasting their gold in the bustling

nighttime bazaars of Cramlin, they had travelled far without rest—and they deserved at least a little sleep. His gaze turned to Emilia; her eyes were dark and dreary, and even though she did not complain, it was clear as day she was more than ready to sleep.

"Hey, Emilia," Subaru called to his partner who stood next to him. Her eyes appeared sleepy, and she let out a yawn. "I can tell you are getting a bit tired. Are you ready to go look for a place to get a good night's rest?"

"Yeeeeeah..." she yawned out her reply in an otherworldly cute manner. "I am feeling rather drowsy... I think I caught sight of a tavern back there next to the bazaar. Maybe we should rest there?"

Subaru found himself hoping whatever tavern they slept in tonight had comfortable beds. The ones they had slept on recently were anything *but* that. They always had a choice to sleep on the floor, but he couldn't bring himself to do that after hours of travel on foot.

Taking her by the hand, Subaru led the drowsy half-elf as if she was a lost puppy. He was tired himself, but she was about to fall asleep standing up!

"I'm *sooo* sorry, Subaru," she mumbled, wiping the sleep from her eyes. "I know you want to stay up and explore the city, but I don't have the energy for that, I think."

He grinned, adoring every second of the sleepy Emilia. "It's far better for us to get a good night's sleep than to stay up all night," he said, his words laden with caution. "*Epecially* with what's in store for us in the future, sleeping would be the responsible thing to do, little Emilia."

Emilia just nodded and gave him a hazy smile.

He needed to find this place, fast, before he must deal with an unconscious half-elf sprawled out in the middle of the bustling streets of Cramlin. *That would be a sight to see*, he thought, the mere notion of it humoring him more than anyone could possibly know.

As if it were a scripted event in a videogame back home—there it was: a sprawling stone-made tavern built into the side of the mountain. It was picturesque, to say the least, something out of every fantasy novel reader's dreams.

The Miner's Hole, the signpost dangling above the entrance read.

Upon entering the tavern, he was amused yet again to witness such a vast and expansive surprise. By far, this was the biggest tavern he had ever seen since he came to this new land. Round wooden tables lined up and down the halls by the dozen, and every single seat was filled with jovial and sodden patrons—mugs of mead in hand, no less. Pipe smoke floated hazily throughout the establishment, and Subaru thought he might just get contact high just by walking from one end to the tavern to the other.

Hoisting Emilia's arm around his shoulder for him to carry her further, he set her down on an empty chair in the corner of the tavern. He figured she would be safe and sound here while he went and rented a room.

"Hey, there..." he murmured, giving her shoulder a light squeeze.

Her long lashes fluttered open, revealing her tired lilac eyes. She gave him a dreary, but inquisitive look.

"...Are you doing okay?" he whispered, his voice of concern giving her the spike of energy she

needed.

"I am fine, Subaru," she said, while giving him a cheeky wink. "Go find us a room, and I'll rest here while you go—but don't worry about me, I'll be fine by myself."

"Okay!" Subaru said enthusiastically. He was excited to finally get in bed for the night.

He took a few steps backward to make sure she wasn't going to fall asleep after he left, and then finally turned on his heel and headed for the bartender.

Emilia's eyes lidded slightly, sleep threatening to overtake her—but she remembered her promise she would stay awake and be okay. She didn't want to worry Subaru any more than she was already.

She sat up and looked around the tavern for the first time, observing all the humans and demi-humans sharing in their merry festivities. It was something she loved to see... humans and half humans, humans and half beasts—getting along together and coexisting peacefully. She only wished that one day, she would be able to coexist with everyone else without having to hide her identity.

While deep in thought, Emilia began to lull herself accidentally back to sleep. Thinking so deeply like this, it was as if she was counting Puck jumping over a fence. Slowly, her eyes lidded once more... the longing for sleep beckoning her to a world far removed from the reality of the present. She saw Puck jump over one fence... and then another... and then another... four times... five times...

A sudden panicked scream jerked her from her mental lullaby.

Shooting up wide awake, Emilia readied herself her hands down by her side—palms open and ready for anything. She looked around frantically, noticing all the eyes of the patrons were tracked on her and her alone.

In front of her was a human woman, and she pointed her finger at Emilia and shouted, "Lo-look at h-her ears!" Her stutter was just an afterthought due to how frightened she was. "It's a half-witch! No, no... maybe it's the Witch of Envy, herself!"

Emilia's eyes moved to her peripheral vision, and then she realized—her hood had fallen, revealing her true nature to everyone around her.

Quickly, another patron—a human male—approached Emilia and grabbed her by her shoulder in a threatening manner.

"What's a witch-freak like yourself doing in here, huh?" he growled both menacingly and detestably. "I dare you to cast a spell, see what happens." He withdrew a knife from his boot and held it to his side, ready to strike at any moment.

Fear overtook Emilia, and she froze up. There's no way she could raise a hand against all these innocent people in here. If she cast magic in here, she could maybe lose control... and it would result in the deaths of countless innocents. She wouldn't let that happen—no, she *couldn't* let that happen.

More and more patrons surrounded her, and she had no idea what to do. All it took was one wrong movement, and someone might kill her for no reason other than out of spite. Where was Subaru? He had to come save her, and do something, *fast*. But Subaru never came, and there's no telling where he was if he wasn't here already.

"You got nothin' to say, huh?!" the drunken patron pressed, raising the knife to her flowing silver locks. "Look at all this beautiful silver hair—it makes me fuckin' sick. What would you do if I cut it all off, right here and now, huh? Don't think I won't do it, because I will."

Hot tears welled up in Emilia's eyes, threatening to fall at any moment. She was powerless to do anything against this man, because if she did... the entire tavern would be frozen over, or *worse*, it would go up in a blaze of fury nobody could control.

Roughly, he took her by a tuft of her long, silver hair. Jerking her down, he brought his rusted blade against her hair and threatened her once more. "I've had enough of this..." he said, and in one quick motion, he cut through her hair as if it wasn't there at all.

A vast amount of silver hair fell solemnly to the ground. He loosened his grip on her and Emilia fell to the floor, her hair now disheveled and hanging just above her shoulders. She lay face down in the floor, her tears of sorrow now trickling one tear at a time down to the weathered stone floor underneath her. Her whimpers had grown to sobbing now, and the embarrassment was all too much for her to handle.

For far too long had she been discriminated against just because she was a half-elf. It was something she had dealt with since the day she stepped foot in a civilization which was not her own. This was one of the worst incidents she had endured, and in such a public place. Nobody had come to defend her—not a single person. Subaru was the only person who would have ever defended her from these vile, disgusting humans—and he wasn't here.

Rage boiled inside of her, and hot tears began to sting as they slid quietly down her cheeks, and soon, they evaporated. The temperature in the room began to rise, and the patrons of the tavern stepped back cautiously as they realized what was happening. The man who cut her hair and defiled her—the one with the knife—dropped it as it burnt a scar deep into his hand from the growing heat of the air.

As the patrons cleared out of the way, one man stepped forward, his footsteps booming as he took them.

Emilia, filled with fury, looked up to the older man with a ferocity he had never seen before from the half-elf. He looked down at her with a gentle pity and sighed softly. Kneeling on one knee, he met with her at eyelevel before he spoke:

"Lady Emilia," he pleaded, his voice filled with caution. "I can't possibly attest I understand your feelings right now, but I can tell you this—you *must*, calm yourself, because if you don't..." He looked around the tavern. By now, everyone around her had dispersed, fleeing out the door before the tavern itself combusted into a fireball of flame. The heat was growing to such levels it might combust even the stones above them. "...You *must* center your feelings, or this entire place is going to be gone very soon."

Emilia's breathing, which was panicked and distraught, began to slow to a more even level. She could feel her heart thumping so hard against her chest it might burst at any moment. Her mind was nothing but a fiery blaze itself, a torrent of chaos she barely kept control of. Any longer, and she might have returned everything around them to ashes.

Wilhelm placed a tender hand on her shoulder and smiled. "I'm so glad you're okay, Lady Emilia," he consoled, his voice filled with gentility and understanding. "I have searched far and wide for you, and by chance or luck, I have found you."

Emilia's drew long, heavy breaths through her nose and blew the air out through her mouth. The

heat in the room began to rescind to an acceptable level, and the sweat on her brow returned. The air, however, was dry and distasteful, as all surrounding liquids had been evaporated within the entire confines of the tavern.

Emilia looked up to Wilhelm with tears welled in her eyes.

"I'm... I'm sorry..." she apologized, her voice no less than a whisper. Fresh tears fell when no one could catch them. "I don't know what came over me... I was just so upset, and I lost control..."

"I understand, Lady Emilia," Wilhelm said, eyeing carefully the tuft of locks which had been incinerated on the floor. "You did nothing of the sort to deserve this... in fact, I will personally find those responsible myself and handle them accordingly, with the harshest measure of punishment."

"Thank you, Master Wilhelm..." she said, before her eyes widened in a sudden realization. Her hands went to her hood which rest on her shoulders. "I... You... I don't..." Her power of speech, easily conquered, escaped her mercilessly.

"Don't worry, Lady Emilia," Wilhelm assured, raising his hand. "I am aware you have been hiding your identity from the world. I knew who you were from the moment I laid eyes on you in the trinket store."

Emilia looked at the floor between her two knees in embarrassment. She had done him a great disservice by hiding her identity from him, especially when he was looking for her. While she wanted to reveal her identity to him immediately, her worry of what might follow prevented her.

"I'm very sorry," Emilia said, her voice breaking. "It's just, I don't know what came over me. You know, so much has happened in the past few weeks—it's almost impossible to think clearly. Any decision we make, it could have repercussions we couldn't possibly understand... so we had to act with precaution."

Wilhelm nodded in understanding, and said, "You don't have to explain yourself to me, Lady Emilia. I have been on your trail ever since the news of your disappearance came to light. I am so happy to have found you, and I will do anything to protect you. I owe it to Master Subaru for giving me the ability to avenge my late wife, Theresia, and I owe it to you. Please, if you have anything to ask of me, do not hesitate, and I will be there for you."

His kind and sincere words spoke almost like the Knight's Oath. It threatened to bring tears to her eyes, tears she could not control. This man, he had cared more deeply about them than he ever cared to admit before, but it showed in his actions—and now it showed in his words.

"Thank you so much!" Emilia thanked, bowing her head profusely before the old gentleman. "I am not worthy of your service! I am afraid I know not how I can repay such an oath."

"There is no repayment," he said plainly, while holding out his hand to lift her to her feet. "A debt is a debt, and a debt paid does not need repayment. My oath to defend you extends as long as I draw breath, or until I am relieved of my services by you—you have my word."

Taking Wilhelm's hand, she stood to her feet, her silver shoulder-length hair billowing elegantly as she had done so. Finally understanding his oath, she nodded her head and gave him her best bright smile.

"I am honored to have you under my service, Master Wilhelm!" Emilia beamed at the elder Knight, and then asked, "But please, you don't have to refer to me as 'Lady Emilia' any longer, if you choose not to. No longer am I befitting of that title..."

Wilhelm shook his head negatively and said, "As long as you are an active candidate for the Royal Selection, you will always have that title. Seeing as you are still alive and well, as far as I can tell anyway—you *are* still in the race for the Royal Selection, wanted or not. Now, it's up to your decision what path you want to pursue, and I will follow you anyway you lead me."

Emilia's eyes widened in astonishment at his words. "I'm still a candidate? I thought that could be the case, but I never believe it would actually be true..."

"You must understand, Lady Emilia," he explained, while adjusting the cuffs of his dress shirt. "There are active agents who are still looking for you, as I'm sure by now you are aware. For the time being, I suggest you continue your current path, but please—try not to attract so much attention to yourself like this. I would hate to see you, or Master Subaru injured because of something like this."

"I understand, Master Wilhelm," Emilia said, bowing her head slightly in embarrassment and sadness. "Which reminds me—Subaru will be so excited to see you again!"

Wilhelm looked around the emptied-out tavern—there was nobody in sight. "Where is Master Subaru, by the way?"

Emilia's eyes widened, and then darted from one end of the tavern to the other. She then looked back to Wilhelm with worry painted over her delicate features. "He said he was going to find us a room in the tavern!" Emilia recalled, panic rising in her voice. "There's no way it took this long, and he wouldn't leave me like this!"

Wilhelm's eyes widened in shock and in a hurry, he turned on his heel with his hand readied on the golden Holy Sword Astrea resting at his hip. Emilia followed quickly behind him, and the two began to search far and wide for their missing companion.

Natsuki Subaru... was nowhere to be found.

The Dark Descent

Subaru's consciousness faded in and out as he watched the moonlit world pass above him; the canvass of a sky beclouded and drenched in vague colors, far too many to count. Beneath him, he heard the rush of leaves, of dirt, and felt the occasional pain as his body was dragged over everchanging terrain without care or thought. Stirring slightly, he craned his neck in order to risk a look at his abductor—but there were two of them.

Cloaked in darkness and concealed beneath matching hoods, it was unmistakable—he was once again a victim of the nefarious Witch Cult.

Each cultist hauled him by his legs with the strength of twelve men, dragging him as if he were a rotten corpse ready to be thrown out into a pit to be buried. Neither noticed their prisoner was now awake, and for that reason, he relaxed his body once more and continued to let them drag him wherever they were taking him, bearing the aches and pains along with it.

If he acted rashly here, surely, they would overpower him, and he would suffer a death colder and more everlasting than before. It was because of this, he must be extra careful, and perhaps even give them what they want from him in that respect. Like before, they wouldn't have captured him alive without reason—and the Witch Cult always had their own objectives, as diabolical and depraved as they were.

As his sight returned to normal once again, a gnawing agony within the confines of his skull revealed itself so. It was a hammering, debilitating ache which sent shockwaves throughout his body and caused him to tense up uncontrollably. Some manner of foul magic had been cast upon him; something so potent he did not even realize it until he had awoken moments ago. The acute resonance of pain threatened to send him into a panic induced delirium, and it took every drop of his will to keep from clawing his own throat in order to cease his silent, but terrible demise.

Now foaming from the mouth, Subaru was rendered unconscious once more, perhaps for the better—his mind was simply unable to process such a torturous pain even after bearing so many deaths before. Gurgling sounds emanated unpleasantly from his frothy mouth, and his muscles tensed on their own in quick, dangerous spasms.

Taking notice of this, one of the cultists turned a glance at their limp passenger; its blood red, demonic gaze almost unreadable, even though its predatory eyes shone in the dark, stalking its prey. Unquestioning, the hooded figure faced forward again and wordlessly continued its march of solitude in unknown directions.

Slowly, Subaru's body stilled, and human perceptions of time, space, and other worldly aspects fell to the wayside of his mind. Weightlessly, he travelled without ever knowing where he was truly going...

...and after some time, he would finally awake again.

It called to him, as if he were being summoned to another world once more. It was that familiar foreboding all over again; sounds of a dark chant stirred him from his slumber.

Coming to his senses once more, his blood-encrusted eyelids cracked open. This time, his surroundings swirled around and around until his eyes began to refocus.

As the world twisted into view, he turned to his left; instinctually, he shielded his sight from an

assailing, blinding luminescence. The abrupt shock sent him cowering against the damp, rocky surface where he lay upon. Shrinking away from the aberrant light, Subaru's legs kicked backwards until he felt himself dangling off a ledge, sending shards of rock tumbling loudly down into a winding chasm. Down they fell, and it was much too long until he heard their descent come to an end, producing a resonating echo throughout the massive expanse of malformed caverns which enveloped him.

Pushing himself away from the shelf of the cliff, Subaru felt a light draft blowing mercilessly from the cracks in the cavern's wall. The icy cool air sent him into a cold sweat, forcing every hair on his bare skin to stand up straight. Involuntarily, he wrapped himself in his uncovered arms to generate some measure of heat as he finally began to realize where he was.

The mystical glow lighting the area in a viridian green hue jutted out from the rocky ground in a magical hive of crystals. He could hear a low hum sound emanating from the curious crystalline formation, as the light dimmed and brightened again in a ritualistic luminous vibration.

Lagmite? he wondered silently, as his hands hovered curiously over the crystals. Unfortunately, they provided no heat, as their strange glow was completely otherworldly.

Rolling over onto his back, Subaru wiped the blood and grime from his face and stared up at the darkness above him. With the lagmite as his only light source, he could discern no ceiling—no end in sight to wherever he was. To make matters much worse, Subaru found he was inside of a makeshift jailcell which had only one walled-off entrance and one damnable exit: straight down.

A couple feet away, there lay a small hole in the wall where the draft was coming from. Rusted bars jutted out from the ground into the rock, preventing him from getting past it. He was entirely sealed off on a cliff of whatever cavern he found himself in—and the exit was no less ideal; the only way down being a deadly plunge to a jagged, rocky surface no man or beast could survive.

He didn't know how long he lay there on the cold surface of the cave, the complete removal of natural light rendering it almost impossible to process the normal passage of time, save for guesswork. Still, he waited patiently for whomever or whatever was coming for him, passing smoothly from the waking world into the deep confines of a restful sleep. It didn't mean he wasn't afraid... because he *was*; it was there—that gaping, crippling fear which sank into the depths of his soul like an unfathomable pit of despair. Such feelings, he had become almost numb to their sensations, given his exposure to an insurmountable and constant level of danger.

But this time was different. Subaru was still without the power which had aided him so many times before. He could feel it in his bones, in his soul; for some reason, the lonely and unmistakable witch who found refuge inside him had fled to places unknown.

He no longer heard the hymn or the laughter which would rack his thoughts in times of trial like this. When he neared the malevolent followers of the Witch Cult, it was always the same. He could hear her inside him, her sweet voice taunting him; it was like a whisper, or a creeping spider which crawled ever so slowly, from one corner of his skull to the other.

He saw her in his mind: her alabaster skin and ashen hair which fell wistfully past her delicate shoulders... the pink hue of her skin which spread itself across the snowy slopes of her cheeks... her gentle amethyst eyes which seemed hopeful, but beneath them lay a deeper sadness he could never understand... and solemn tears brimming her eyes—a reminder of such sadness one could seldom forget.

Her picturesque appearance was embedded into his brain firmer than the alphabet of his world, from beyond the everflowing streams of the waterfall. He knew every detail; from the contours of

her body, to her sweet smell of jasmine, and her gentle voice which whisked him away to a dreamland far beyond his own imaginations. She was as much *his* lover as *she* was his pursuer, a woman who existed in two realities—both in the physical world and in the land of dreams.

There, above him, as he stared at the endless darkness and expanse of the cavern, he saw two fading figures, their similarities so striking to the point where they couldn't be discerned from one another. Were they the same person? He didn't know, and for the life of him, he couldn't shake their gaze from his own. Her cyan pupils bore into his own, piercing him deep to the core of his existence. Dazed and confused, Subaru continued to gaze into the nothingness, and soon, the two individuals began to overlap one another, until only one remained.

Cloaked in a dark garb growing from the shadows themselves, the hooded half-elf relaxed her stern expression, unable to hide her love for the gazing man staring up from the cavern floor.

"Hast thou dreamt of me?" she asked, her serene voice pulling him closer and closer to her with every syllable. "I beseech you, for I only wonder alone. Bescreeened under this dark and night, separating us—doth thou still thinketh of me?"

Subaru nodded, absorbing her sweet sound. A moment later he replied, as eloquently as he could, "Even if the world ceased to exist, and this heart stopped beating inside me... you would never disappear from my mind."

"Doth thou... truly mean such words?" the nameless shadow asked once more.

Subaru found himself shaking. He tried hard to control his emotions, but the more he concentrated, the more he faltered and could not make himself stop.

Nervously, his mouth opened, declaring, "You have given me something more than just the ability to live life again... You have given me the ability to live my life to the fullest. To live for you, even though I have barely come to know you; to die for you, even though you do everything within your ability to keep this heart beating."

The apparition cautiously hovered closer to Subaru, bathing her in pulsing viridian light. Her expression was now clear as day to him, as was her kindhearted demeanor. Subaru had always known her to be a creature of jealousy, for reasons he could not understand. In the darkness they shared together, he heard her voice once more; a single phrase which would resonate within his mind for eternity... and for the first time, he truly heard *her*:

"I... loveth thee... more than the world..."

He felt something burst inside himself, and soon his shaking ceased. Within him, the agony and pain which raged like a stormy sea fell silent—and within that abrupt, absolute inner stillness of waters, he felt himself calmly guided to an epiphany.

There, he saw how she was looking at him. He felt her call, her absolute admission of innocence and the purity of her confession... but behind that, he felt an aching hunger within her soul he could finally comprehend.

"I love you too..." Subaru confessed back. He was entirely at peace now, her gentle aura blanketing him in a calmness only one person could match—but still, he found it hard to speak *that name*. After a moment's time, the thickness in his voice ceased, and he felt himself able to continue once more, "I finally know who *you* are... You have been there by my side the entire time, and I didn't even know it. How... can I ever be forgiven?"

Even as he spoke, she continued to come closer to him in her ghostly way. The fair-skinned half-elf's hood faded from sight, revealing a face all-too-familiar to him. She gave him a shy smile and closed her eyes in joy—allowing a few impactful tears to fall without care. As Subaru went to speak once more, she pressed her delicate finger to his lips and silenced him.

"Prithee, speaketh not thy apology..." she whispered into his ear, her hot breath tickling him and covering him in goose bumps. "If it be true thee must be forgiven, then I shalt bear thy fault. 'Tis mine own self which didst cause thee so much pain..."

Subaru found himself lost in the song of her speech. The way she talked, the way every syllable elicited from her tantalizing lips... it was almost *too* distracting. But he listened to her anyway, his attentiveness unparalleled in their moment of truth.

"Ah... it wasn't so bad..." he said, even if it were a lie. "What has happened to me wasn't your fault... and if it wasn't for the power you gave me, I would have been dead moments after I stepped foot into this world. If you did anything, you *saved* me, and so... I'm going to save you!"

Even if he meant well, the impact of his words only carried a sense of loss.

"Thou... canst save me now," she admitted sadly, as a new wave of tears threatened to fall at any moment. "I am beyond saving, and whence the time cometh, thou shalt kill me... Ending mine own life, *is* saving me..."

Shock and confusion stretched itself across Subaru's face, and his eyes widened greatly. He was wordless as he stared into her tear-soaked lavender eyes, unable to move and unable to comfort her as she continued.

"The power I bestowed ere upon thee, 'twas the power to end mine own existence..." she uttered almost breathlessly. Her appearance was cracking now, revealing a more manic side to the gentle guise she thus presented him in this moment. "But I hath felt thee shun me, and so I tooketh thy power. Truthfully, I bethought thee didst wish it gone... I bethought thee wast eft to abandon it like I bethought mine own self abandoned. But thee hast called to me once more, and I hath heard you—and here I stayeth, each moment by thy side, at each moment faithful."

"You are everything I want," Subaru replied quickly, almost uncontrollably. "I realize that now... ever since I set my eyes on you in this world, I knew that. From the first moment... to the last, every time I close my eyes, you are there, etched into every single solitary thought... and I will never harm you."

Her pained expression softened into one more of joy once again, and she hovered closer to him once more. They were inches from each other now, so close he could feel the slight warmth of her breath against his cold nose.

"Thy words bringeth such happiness to me," she admitted, her voice wavering with emotion. "But... I canst be one with thee anymore, for reasons I shan't tell. I didst want to stay so close to thee... as close as I couldst, but such a thing is not possible. Even if thou knowest why, I shalt not utter such truths hither..."

She looked at him curiously, before giving him a sad smile which made him want to ask a thousand questions. There, she hovered patiently, awaiting something, and maybe something from himself.

Moments passed, and she finally spoke again, saying, "I shalt leave at this moment... and I doth not know when I shalt be able to return like this."

Subaru smiled at her. "What if I just call your name?" he asked her, causing her to let out a small gasp.

"Tis possible..." she said, her voice quiet and unsure. "But I fear thee mayst not say mine own name the correct way..."

"Then how?" Subaru asked.

Closing her eyes, she shyly averted her gaze from him. "Bethink of us, about *our* love, and all the memories we didst share together, and one day, I shall come thither—by thy side."

After she said this, silence followed quickly. The two lovers who shared the darkness together, continued their peaceful quiet, as they absorbed each other in every way they could without physical contact. After a while, he couldn't tell whether it was a trick of the light, or his mind playing games with him—but she began to fade. Her ghostly apparition, previously tangible and solid, turned translucent in the viridian light of the crystals.

Subaru nodded solemnly at her, and then unexpectedly, he reached his arms around the apparition to ensnare her in his grasp for the first time.

As she felt his arms encircle her, she let out a small gasp for the second time.

It was his first attempt to give her some manner of physical love in this new world, which lay outside the splintered reality of his mind... and his hands passed through her as if there was nothing there at all.

The pulsating light of the lagmite crystals continued its near-metronomic show—but no longer was the half-elf there. The calming presence of her beauty was replaced once again by the discomforting quiet of an endless shadow.

She was *gone*.

Broken once more, Subaru lay there against the hard, rocky floor of the cavern.

He was so close to touching her... so close to showing her he cared... so close to showing her he *knew*. He just needed to touch her once, to remind her he loved her, to show her he hadn't forgotten her. It devastated him to know she went through such pains for him all this time, and he hadn't returned any of her affection. He even tried to get rid of her... and even when *he* himself was the source of her jealousy. It was his fault, because he didn't know the truth before—but he fully understood it now.

Contemplating this, Subaru lay there for hours, and soon he was unable to discern reality from his own delusions. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw *her*. She was haunting him yet again, even though she was not with him. She was more like a ghost now than anything, something ephemeral who showed herself, only to leave just as quickly as she came. A fleeting dream which reflected the reality of his misshapen world.

Soon, something caught Subaru's eye, and he was wrenched from the confines of his imagination.

The lagmite crystals lining the walls of the cavern—they had changed color from their peaceful green to an unsightly blood-red. Curious, Subaru crawled over to one of the clusters, and once again drew his hand closer to it. Still, it emanated no warmth—but something had changed about it. As his hands drew closer, he felt a shiver tingle down his spine like whenever magic was used around him. *What's going on here?* he thought darkly.

As if his thoughts were a beckoning, two shadowy figures malformed from the surface across the rusted bars in front of him in response. At their presence, he could hear the low hum of a chant spilling effortlessly from their mouths. Easily startled, Subaru crawled backwards away from them as they peered curiously through the crevice of the cavern at him, their hooded guises betraying no emotion they must have felt.

The mysterious figures receded and then gave him a deep bow of respect, before touching both of their gloved hands gently on the bar in front of them.

Faint goose bumps spread across Subaru's flesh, just like always before when magic was used in his presence—especially by these dark magicians.

Where their hands once touched the bar, the bar vanished piece by piece, until it was no more. Now free to walk in, the hooded figures invited themselves to his presence as they stepped into the light of the reddened crystal lagmite. It bathed them in a sinister red hue which made them to appear as devils, intensifying the relentless anxiety their unfortunate prisoner felt.

Subaru continued to observe them with a mix of apprehensive fear and mild curiosity. They were repulsive and disgusting individuals, but he couldn't help but wonder what they wanted with him this time. They had treated him so poorly by kidnapping him and taking him here, injuring him, and leaving him here to rot for what felt like days without food or water. So, why did they show such respect now?

Without warning, the two cultists stepped to the side as another grew menacingly out of the ground from the shadows behind them. This new cultist, wearing slightly different, and more adorned robes than the other two, invited himself in as well without a second thought.

As the head cultist stepped forward, their chanting grew louder and more chaotic; then suddenly, from within his robe, he wordlessly withdrew a book bound in black leather—a *gospel*.

With meticulous respect to custom, the cultist knelt on one knee, and with two hands, he respectfully sat the solemn book on the ground before stepping away from it. The cultist bowed once more in adulation and took his leave through the crevice in the wall with no parting words. The other two cultists, who paid the ordinally dressed cultist with respect, followed suit, exiting through the hole as well.

Silently, one of the cultists gestured with his hand, literally drawing a mystical barrier of translucent haze from the bottom of the crevice to the very top, before it transformed into the rusted bars once more. From either lack of light or shadow magic, Subaru couldn't tell; all three figures vanished immediately from sight, disappearing into the darkness of the cavern.

He was left alone once more, with just the book to keep him company as it lay quietly on the cavern's floor.

The longer Subaru stared at the mysterious object on the ground, the more uncomfortable he felt. Surely, it was just a book, but its presence affected him deeply unlike the other gospels he had come across before. When he had unknowingly traversed the pages of Petelgeuse's gospel, he had felt nothing, nor did he understand any of the ancient text which filled its pages. It was just a plain book, but this time, something was different—it felt... *alive*.

The now palpitating red light from the lagmite crystals continued their fervent dance, painting the caverns of the wall in what appeared to be blood. The lagmite appeared to be almost fed by whatever magic was emanating from the loathsome gospel, the dark magic shaping and twisting them into a torturous mirror of its former self.

Initially, as Subaru stared at the lonesome tome, he couldn't hear anything; but soon enough, in that painfully quiet darkness, there was *something* coming from the book. He couldn't quite make anything of it at first, but there definitely was something there! He thought he might be losing his mind, but the sound grew louder, and louder, and louder, before it became clear what was filling his ears.

The book was speaking to him.

At first, the book's chant was a jumbled mess; even if he knew the abhorrent language, it was all but impossible to understand. It sounded as if it were speaking gibberish to him, which annoyed him to no end. But as the hours continued, and as Subaru sat there alone with the living book, the gibberish began to turn to simple words... and the simple words to sentences... and then, he heard it clear as day:

"...*Endless vexation... Fragile ego... An insatiable hunger... The everlasting ardor...*" the disembodied voice spoke.

Its ominous and distorted words gnawed eagerly at his mind, and then he realized...

He understood them! He *understood* what was being chanted. It was faint, but it was there!

Subaru's horrid expression was slowly replaced by one of madness. His lips curved into a faint smile, and his brow furrowed maniacally. The more his new friend spoke to him, the more the lunacy of the situation added to his newfound hysteria.

He felt something welling up inside him he never once experienced before. It was an inexplicable darkness which he could not explain, an unscratchable itch in his stomach. It grew and wiggled mindfully around inside him, searching for a way out, only to meet the walls of his organs in dismay.

Such feelings only served to beckon him to darkness once more. It felt similarly to that dark, sinking feeling in his stomach he felt every time he died. Soon, his smile curved higher into a smirk, and before he knew it, he let out an insane and uncontrollable laughter. It was a cackling one rivalling even the most devious and maniacal of characters he had been exposed to in this new world.

His laughter continued, until his voice grew hoarse and the taste of his saliva turned putrid. Eventually, he couldn't laugh anymore, and the dryness parching the insides of his mouth silenced him completely and utterly.

With only the sounds of the chant to fill his mind and the echoing caverns around him, Subaru sank deeper and deeper into madness and despair. With his laughter gone—the one tool he could use to drown out the virulent words—he truly entered hell.

As time went on, the chants from the book grew louder, forcing Subaru to cup his ears in a desperate attempt to silence the assailing object. But the chants did not stop, and they kept coming, and coming, and coming. For hours, Subaru lay there, as the repetitious taunt continued their merciless attack on his brittle mind:

*"...Endless vexation... Fragile ego... An insatiable hunger... The everlasting ardor... Endless
vexation... Fragile ego... An insatiable hunger... The everlasting ardor... Endless vexation...
Fragile ego... An insatiable hunger... The everlasting ardor... Endless vexation... Fragile ego...
An insatiable hunger... The everlasting ardor... Endless vexation... Fragile ego... An insatiable
hunger... The everlasting ardor... Endless vexation... Fragile ego... An insatiable hunger... The*

[illegible]

Relentlessly, the chant continued its hemorrhaging attack. After an unknown amount of time passed, Subaru was reduced to nothing but an incoherent mess as the poisonous words filled his brain with the darkest and vilest inconceivable messages. It hunted him, and no matter where he hid, the book found its way deep inside the depths of his mind. It was all he saw, and all he felt—and it was all he knew, and all he would ever know.

The book was *everything*... and he wished for nothing but to get up and take the thing, if not for just a chance to toss it over the chasm next to him—but he couldn't. Something otherworldly compelled him not to, something so far from the realm of his own control he dared not sneak even the slightest glance at the atrocious object.

So, he lay there, unable to move, and unable to act on his own free will. He was succumbing to the chant—the fatal words of sin.

After a great amount of time passed, Subaru rushed over to the book and placed his hand on it. He felt the warmth of its leather-bound body spread across him, banishing the chill which had stricken him since he was brought here. He felt comfortable, calm even—one could say Subaru was completely at peace.

His fingers spread across the pages of the book, cherishing the texture as his digits melded effortlessly against the blank cover. He caressed it lovingly, almost tenderly like how he would touch the one whom he adored... or hold something close to him whom he had been separated from for an eternity. The book fervently vibrated under the tips of his fingers, as if responding to his unspoken love—and it whispered to him once more:

"...Control thy avarice... Reject all levels of indolence... and..."

Subaru's eyes widened as the book finally opened itself, revealing its pristine and untouched pages.

Brushing the tips of his fingers over symbols carefully etched in blood, he read the first words in a dead language none would ever speak, nor would they ever wish to.

"...All which remains, is thy jealousy..."

* * *

Emilia felt herself beginning to cry, and not just from exhaustion, but also from the completely unexpected loss of her lover more than anything else.

For the entire night, they had searched around the city of Cramlin; in between the alleyways, through the dank and rotten sewers, and in foreign establishments both far and wide away from where she last saw him. Now covered in doubt, she sat pitifully on a rotten barrel under a gutter somewhere within the throngs of the city, forgotten to the world as merchants and regular-folk continued their morning machinations.

By now, the young and orangish sun was beginning to creep up over the walls of the city for the first time since they had arrived here, lighting the soaring mountains above them in a gloriously golden hue. The marvelousness of the sight was lost to Emilia as she sat there, almost drowning in her own thoughts as she raced through them in order to find answers to the unanswerable.

Next to her, standing unquestionably by her side, was Wilhelm van Astrea. Noticing her shoulders drooping further into despair, he drew nearer to her, but was careful enough to not intrude himself upon her silent brooding. He understood, almost too painfully, how it was to lose someone who was so close and bounded by love—and while he wouldn't rest until she reunited with him happily, he couldn't help but fear the worst for her. For now, he would always be by her side, unwavering in his support for her while she suffered without her second half.

Emilia's frown deepened as she stared at the puddle in the grimy mud beneath her. In the reflection, she saw her new self; a half-elf with silver-hair—one dangling gently above her shoulders, instead of flowing far past them. Suddenly, particles of ice began to form around the puddle, and it frosted over as if Lugnica had unexpectedly entered the season of the blue-sun.

This action drew a worried glance from Wilhelm, but he continued to leave her alone out of respect for her tumultuous emotions. No stranger to love and tragedy, he truly understood her feelings more than she could ever know.

At this point, she almost didn't care anymore what people thought of her. She was tired of it all: tired of being a half-elf, and tired of enduring such ostracization from all peoples of the world. She wished for nothing but the best for all people, but in return, she was given the worst of it—all for the sake of her heritage and likeness to a four-hundred-year-old legacy.

As if reflecting that point, her current presentation made it more than apparent: her magical hood rested upon her shoulders, and her pointy ears were on display for all the world to see. However, the pair sat just far enough from the hustle and bustle of the morning merchant rush she was in no fear of being seen or noticed by anyone.

Wiping her exhausted eyes of the last bit of tears they could spend, Emilia relaxed her position on the barrel and turned to face Wilhelm. In response, he graced her with a slight and gentlemanly bow.

"Lady Emilia?" he addressed her respectfully, making it a point to avoid direct eye contact with her now disheveled state. "If you have attained enough rest, then I must respectfully request we continue our search for Master Subaru."

Emilia didn't even know what to say in response. She was beyond tired and had stayed up all through the night searching for her lost companion. She eyed Wilhelm carefully, but said nothing

else.

After a moment's thought, she took a deep breath and said, "I'm fine, Master Wilhelm... and I'm sorry for slowing you down. I know you worked tirelessly through the night with me, and I owe you so much for that... I just..." She swallowed hard, as her dried mouth stifled her speech.

"There is no need for apologies," he replied in a knightly fashion, as he stepped closer to her to show more support. "I am just as considerate for your own welfare as I am for our search. Even if there are more pressing matters at hand than that of rest, I am sure Master Subaru would feel the same way."

Emilia felt a small smile grace her lips. She glanced over to Wilhelm and met eyes with him. She said, nervously, "You're right... Subaru would be *soooo* worried about me. That's just the kind of person he is; always worrying about others more than himself. But we should continue... I've had enough rest, and I know Subaru wouldn't rest even a minute if he were looking for me."

As if beckoned by some otherworldly force, Wilhelm snapped to attention and took a step, before saying, "There has been word of recent Witch Cult activity in the area. Therefore, I find it likely our search for Master Subaru will lead us to them. I suggest we reach out to the local garrison located in the Administrative District of Cramlin."

Emilia's voice caught in her throat once more. "The... Witch... Cult?" she uttered their venomous name, failing to hide the tremble in her voice. "Do you... Do you really think they took Subaru? We were just in a tavern... Does that mean they have infiltrated the entire city?"

Wilhelm's expression turned grave. "That is precisely what I think," he said carefully, thumbing the pommel of his cherished sword. "It's unmistakable, in fact, and it's the only conclusion I can make after having searched so long and found nothing. This wouldn't be Master Subaru's first run in with the Witch Cult, now would it...?"

Nodding silently, Emilia looked up at him with worry. "I just can't believe they are all over the place like this... first at the Mathers dominion, then on the road, and now this far to the east? They must be planning something—something *big*."

"The worry for that comes later," he said resolutely, before reaching out his hand to help her up. "For now, we worry about our search for Master Subaru."

Emilia nodded once more and took his hand. With both hands, she pulled her hood up over her head once more to hide her true appearance, and then the two set off toward the garrison together.

As she walked alongside Wilhelm, she continued to think bad thoughts to herself. She couldn't help it, as she felt so powerless to what was happening around her. If Subaru was indeed taken by the Witch Cult, it couldn't have meant anything good, and it *probably* even had something to do with herself. She knew they had an acute interest in her because of her likeness to the Jealous Witch, and because of that, she couldn't help but feel responsible for what was happening all over again.

She wondered of the past; about when the cult had discovered she was still alive, or when they had picked up on her trail. Was it just a coincidence, or happenstance? Was it planned from a time unknown? Her silent self interrogations kept her preoccupied as the two made their way through the living city, bringing her back to the events over the past week. They had been careful to hide their identities from the world, made every calculated step to make sure none knew of their survival. Save for the incident at the tavern yesterday, there really wasn't any explanation for how the Witch Cult even thought they had survived. She strained herself to think harder.

Emilia's eyes widened sharply.

Her mind raced back to the time where they had stepped into the cursed wood across the river from Nicia. The forest had been boobytrapped with a curse powerful enough to cover its entire expanse. She had figured it was cast there intentionally, because why else would someone place a curse over such a wide area which would affect so many innocents?

That *had* to be it, there was no other explanation. Whatever trap they came upon had triggered a detection spell which identified them to whoever cast it—and come to think of it, she was not wearing her magical cloak at the time of the spell's activation.

Embarrassed, she looked down at the ground as her own two feet rhythmically stepped out in front of each other, one at a time. She should to have been able to detect that kind of magic, especially because of how large it was. Normally, curses which were placed on small areas were trickier to detect, because one must pinpoint the exact location, but when they are utilized in wider ways, they become easier to notice.

I'm soooo stupid! she mentally chastised herself. If only she had been more careful...

There were a limited number of things she could do to protect Subaru in her own way, and this was one of them. The ability to detect and sense enchantments, curses and other mystical spells of the world was a latent ability well-honed by magic users much like herself. With her newfound memories returning to her more and more every night, she continually found herself realizing she had more ability than she ever could have thought of. Even without Puck, she was able to use abilities which were long forgotten to her.

Puck... she thought, instinctually grasping the missing stone hanging from her neck. It felt more than odd for that crystal to be vacant on her person. Suddenly, she remembered why they had come here in the first place. With the recent events happening, it had been pushed so far to the corners of her mind that she almost forgot!

Abruptly, Wilhelm slowed his pace by her side and turned an eye to Emilia. Noticing this, she left the safe confines of her mind and returned to the world at present. She had to banish these thoughts if she were to ever function the way she wanted to, and so she turned her attention to her newfound companion.

"We have arrived, my lady," he addressed her politely, before looking up at the expansive fortress.

In front of them, was a well-fortified garrison built in stone and old in age. While it gave off the impression that at one point, it stood over the city in shining vibrance, its cracked and weary appearance made it apparent it had gone years without refurbishment. At the center of the archway leading to the main entry-gate hung the royal dragon banners which represented the Dragon Kingdom of Lugnica.

Passing underneath the seal of the Divine Dragon, Wilhelm stepped forward and gave a knock on the door. For a moment, the two waited patiently outside, as nobody came to greet them. However, Wilhelm did not knock again, and thus the two continued to await their greeter.

"Do you think they are somewhere else?" Emilia asked quietly to her knightly companion. "I mean, they wouldn't leave us waiting out here like this normally, right?"

It seemed a silly question, but she wanted to break the awkward silence anyway.

"I'm afraid not," Wilhelm said, his voice slightly annoyed at that. "It's too early in the morning for

them to be out doing anything, in fact. They should be arriving at the door any minute now, if we are patient enough to wait."

Giving him a slight nod, Emilia crossed her arms and propped herself up on the stone wall next to her. Brushing her growing bangs from her eyes, she peered up at the towering building, observing what was essentially a relic, or monument of a bygone age.

Many of these garrisons were sprouted up during the Demi-Human War, when such protections were needed in every city and village stretching across the land. It was a bitter war, fought between humans, halves and demi-humans which resulted in the deaths of thousands and the destruction of entire cities. As a half-elf herself, it was a painful reminder of an antiquated past which still affected her today, and because of that, it made her feel uneasy.

Growing impatient himself, Wilhelm raised finally raised his fist for another knock on the gates... and the sliding hatch swung open without warning, revealing a pair of inquisitive blue eyes.

"State your business—!" the faceless voice boomed through the peering hole in the gate. "You are standing in front of the Kingdom Knights of Lugnica."

Stepping into view of the hatch, Wilhelm revealed himself. "That I am," he introduced carefully, looking the man on the other side straight in the eye. "I am Wilhelm van Astrea, or have I grown so old by now I am forgotten?"

The pair of blue eyes blinked and widened in what appeared to be terror. Immediately, he shut the hatch, and after mere seconds, Wilhelm could hear him hurriedly unlocking the mechanisms which shuttered the gate—and then the gate finally lurched open, creaking and cracking as it had done so.

As the gate widened to its maximum expanse, Wilhelm came face to face with a young Kingdom Knight who appeared no older than he when he was in his prime, forty years ago. The young man had piercing blue eyes, blonde hair, and wore the traditional white garb of a knight he had abandoned so long ago.

"Master... Wilhelm..." he uttered breathlessly as he snapped to a salute faster than the eye could see.

Eyeing him carefully, Wilhelm let a slight smirk grace his hardened features. "At ease..." he ordered while returning the salute, allowing the young knight to relax himself after a moment of scrutiny.

Relaxing his salute, he said nervously, "Forgive me for my insolence! Please, I beg of you... I have heard the legends of your crusades... Please forgive me!"

"Relax, young one," Wilhelm advised the young man, while raising his hand to calm him. "I am not here to pester such a young knight as yourself. You have done nothing wrong and you have not dishonored yourself. Please, if you may—introduce yourself."

"My name is Thaler Morstead, Knight Errant of the Special Reactionary Brigade," Thaler introduced himself as best he could. "I am not worthy to be in your presence... if you want me to fetch the Commander... I will do so immediately!"

"That would be appropriate, Knight Errant," Wilhelm said as he stepped through the gateway and into the garrison. He motioned for Emilia to follow him in, which she did so. "Please, inform me of who is in command here... It has been some time since I have been away."

"The acting Knight Commander is Conwood Melhau," Thaler replied quickly, as he led them down

a long and winding corridor. "Commander Melhau has just returned from a leave of absence and re-commissioned into the Kingdom Knights after the last acting Commander fell ill."

A fond smile curved from the stern features of Wilhelm. "Oh, is that so...?" he murmured, a burst of nostalgia washing over him as he remembered their old trailblazing days together. "So, the taste of the White Whale was not enough to quench an old-man's thirst, huh? I can say I actually agree with him for once in that respect."

Unsure of how to respond, Thaler continued off subject, "His vast amount of experience and practical nature of operation has already led to the successful subjugation of a local Witch Cult sect. His leadership is invaluable, and we are honored to have him serve amongst our ranks once more."

"I see..." Wilhelm replied, his brow furrowed and deep in thought. "So, your men have already had numerous excursions with the cultists then..."

"Aye, sir," Thaler gestured affirmatively, and continued. "Over the past month, there has been a resurgence of cultist activity in both the mountains and surrounding forests for an unknown reason. We have worked tirelessly in order to keep their evil forces at bay."

"This information you have provided me has been very helpful, Knight Errant. You have done well."

Wilhelm couldn't see it, but the young knight was grinning from ear to ear in response to hearing such praise from the most renowned Kingdom Knight of old. Wilhelm van Astrea was almost like a living jewel to the Kingdom Knights, so colored his history was with them. After leaving the order for so many years, it was a monumental occasion to see him walk through their history-laden halls to enact official business once more.

"Thank you, sir—!" Thaler beamed, away from the sight of his appraiser.

As the trio walked silently along the hallways, they found themselves heading closer and closer to the center of the garrison, where the Commander's chambers were. Every knight they passed by stopped to salute Wilhelm in a deep modicum of respect, and he addressed them with his own in return.

Truthfully, he didn't feel like he had earned the respect they had given so willingly to him. His actions were always out of his own love for his dearest wife—Theresia—and for that, he felt somewhat selfish. Of course, there were times when his own need for personal justice superseded those of the values befitting of a knight, and it made him feel shameful. Out of spite, he had left the order, the bitter falling out between his son and grandson marring a heritage unlike any other in the kingdom. He only hoped one day he would rectify all the wrongs he had made in his life.

And he would no doubt get that chance very shortly.

Knocking on the door to the Commander's chambers, Thaler stated his business in an official tone, "Knight of the Divine Dragon, Wilhelm van Astrea, is requesting permission to enter, sir!"

There was a momentary silence, but it didn't last long.

"You may enter, Thaler," a familiar voice granted passage from beyond the door.

Snapping to attention, Thaler unlatched the door and slid it open, before popping against the wall to allow the old knight and his guest to pass through. Wilhelm and Emilia entered the chambers, and the heavy-wooden door shuttered heavily behind them, allowing them privacy in their meeting.

Wispy smoke fluttered throughout the stagnant air of the enclosed chambers. There, in front of them, sat Conwood Melahau, pipe in hand, and with a curious glint in his eye. His normally olive-green hair had speckles of grey and white in them, demonstrating he, too, was becoming old as Wilhelm had.

"Well, well, well... To whom do I owe this pleasure?" Conwood spoke heartily, breaking the ice between the two parties. "You know very well I never expected to see you so shortly after the subjugation of the White Whale, Wilhelm!"

Rising joyously from his large chair, Conwood approached his old comrade and they embraced each other closely, like all lifetime friends should.

"You said, *Commander* Melahau, did you?" Wilhelm said with a playful smirk hidden underneath his growing beard. Ceasing their embrace, he looked over Conwood carefully. "Look at you! I never took you for an old and sodded knight."

Stifling a laughter and drawing a long toke of his pipe, Conwood smiled. "It was upon personal request of the Sage Council—not that I would have had any choice in the matter, especially with how recent events are going. The lack of astute leadership within the Kingdom Knights is glaringly obvious, and I felt like I could help out a bit with these youngsters... and don't forget, even an old man like me can teach them a thing or two."

"You seem to have a good and respectful crew under your belt," Wilhelm added, as Conwood eased back into his chair once more. "I met the young one, Thaler, and several others along the way here. They are young indeed, but so were we... once upon a time."

Letting out another chuckle, Conwood pointed to the ornate suit of armor hanging on the stand next to him.

"You see that?" he said, pointing, before drawing another smoke from his pipe. "That's the same suit of armor I wore forty-years ago, can you believe that? Something so old like that, it gives these young knights the hope they need to do their duties, so one day they may grow old and sodded just like myself, basking in the tales of the glory days."

Nodding in understanding, Wilhelm commented, "You wore armor? I can scarcely remember that, old friend. All I can recollect was the swinging chain of your flail and the broadsword you carried on your back, the size of myself." Wilhelm let out his own reserved laughter in recollection of such memories.

"And I was always saving your ass!" Conwood corrected him quickly, causing both parties to laugh in unison. After this last round of joyous bellowing passed into history, he narrowed his gaze at his guest and raised a brow. "But, Wilhelm, you and I both know you didn't come here to share stories of the past."

Taking on a more serious gaze once more, Wilhelm stirred slightly. "You're right," he said, and he invited himself to sit in one of the chairs in front of the Commander's desk. Emilia, quiet and out of place, sat in the another one adjacent to Wilhelm. "There are pressing matters to attend to, and I would be in your debt if you would let me regale you a tale most concerning."

A stream of hazy smoke blew from the lips of Conwood, before he said, "Does it involve the horde of cultists lingering around the gates of Cramlin?"

Wilhelm's eyes widened and then quickly narrowed once more, betraying little emotion. Conwood must have been fast enough to catch his response, because he saw him smirk, then say:

"Precisely..."

Reaching from within his desk, he withdrew a large map and unfurled it, before tossing it onto his wood carved desk. Immediately, he stood, and then stretched it out until it was able to be previewed in full length. Drawing his fingers to certain key points on the map, he said:

"We have had an increased amount of cultist activity in the area here over the past month. We know not why, but it stands to reason it probably has something to do with the events which befell the Royal Selection Candidate, represented by the Mathers dominion. The timeline of events is almost completely in tandem with one another, so we have been formulating a plan to initiate a counterattack within the next few days before they have any chance to enact their misdeeds."

Wilhelm stood attentively, listening to what his seasoned friend had to say, while Emilia sat uncomfortably in the chair next to him under the guise of her magical cloak. Conwood drew from his pipe once more before expelling the smoke back into the air.

Pointing to a specific circle on the map, he continued, "We have pinpointed their hideout to one of several caverns resting on Mount Cordor. As well as this, we have discovered they have small detachments and encampments numbering in the dozens—they are situated around the city itself deep in the woods."

"That is quite a large-scale effort," Wilhelm admitted, his face calm and reserved. "They must be gathering their forces for the right moment—which reminds me: on my travels here from the capital, I came across a small detachment of Kingdom Knights. They had undoubtedly been slain by cultists, as I found this at the scene of the crime." Withdrawing a bloodied dagger from his pack, Wilhelm tossed it on the table for his friend to observe.

Picking it up by the handle, Conwood ran his eyes over it in an inspecting manner. The adornments of the blade itself were no doubt unique to those possessed by cultists themselves, and the hilt was a crimson-red, signifying the color of the foretold red moon.

"An entire detachment of Kingdom Knights, you say?" Conwood questioned, his voice suddenly turning very grave. "Then we are worse off than I may fear... three days ago, I sent word to the capital of their impending strike, and we were supposed to have reinforcements sent promptly by travel of the east-road. If what you say is true, then we will not be receiving any more reinforcements, and the enemy has begun their strike."

"I'm afraid it is true, my friend," Wilhelm stated matter-of-factly, before pointing to the girl who sat comfortably next to him. "It was impolite for me to do so, but I have failed to introduce my companion who sits next to me."

Placing his pipe down on the desk, Conwood eyed her carefully. She was wearing an odd type of hood, but otherwise, her appearance was nothing special to note about. "What is your name, young one?" he asked her abruptly.

"Erm... If I may," Emilia said, her frail voice displaying her unsurety. This was the first time she had talked for quite some time, as she was unsure on what to say. "My name is... Lia... and I hail from the Forest of Kremaldy... sir."

Conwood raised an eyebrow. Her response was strange, but he decided not to press it any further due to his lasting relationship with Wilhelm. If she was concealing her identity, then Wilhelm was obviously aware of it, and for that reason he did not care to linger on the matter any further. "Well, Lia..." Conwood said, as warmly as he could in fact. "It is an honor to have you as a guest in these vaunted halls. Any friend of Wilhelm van Astrea is always welcome in my company and

attention!" He gave her a soft smile.

Feeling more at ease, Emilia relaxed herself a bit. "Thank you so much, sir! You have honored me by allowing me the time to speak with you. I know this is so sudden... but there is an urgency to our situation unlike any other!"

"More specifically," Wilhelm said, correcting her before she spoke any further. "The cultists who surround Cramlin are directly involved with what we are about to share with you."

His expression hardening, Conwood sighed deeply. "As I presumed already..."

Silence prevailed the room for a moment, before Wilhelm decided to continue once more, saying, "We fear the Witch Cult has taken one of our closest companions; someone of extreme importance who, I have sworn an allegiance to defend. Therefore, I have come so humbly before you today, my old friend."

"How do you know this for sure?" he inquired, interested at how he came to such a conclusion.

"My reasoning is simple," Wilhelm replied evenly. "Our companion, who is missing, has had the unfortunate experience of having crossed blades with the cult very recently. It stands to reason the emergence of the Witch Cult and the disappearance of our compatriot are closely related."

Rubbing his temple in pain, Conwood said, "And what actions do you suppose we take?"

"We must act *now*..." Wilhelm said, his voice resolute and infallible. "Because if we don't, every passing moment is a moment of great peril for himself."

His eyes floated smoothly from Wilhelm to Emilia, and he eyed her with a curious suspicion, before asking, "If I may be so impolite as to ask, what is the relationship between this companion and the girl who sits in front of me? I can only make one guess..."

"Your guess would be correct," Wilhelm affirmed the fear of his old friend. "It is a matter of love."

The Commander dragged his hands uneasily over his face and let out a deep sigh. Regaining his composure, he looked over to the girl and said darkly, "You realize don't you, young girl, that even if we do successfully wipe out this cultist sect by ourselves, you may not like what you find at the end?"

Unsure of how to respond, Emilia stared at the old knight wordlessly, before she broke eye contact with the knight and toyed nervously with her fingers.

"That's enough, old friend..." Wilhelm chided him for dampening her already hindered spirits. There was a hint of anger in his voice, as the volume of his speech steadily grew. "You do not need to remind her of what dangers her partner is exposed to... and if you want my say in it, I will never stop believing he will be okay. I have taken a solemn oath to protect this boy, and I will cut down every cultist in the entire land if it comes to that!"

Emilia, initially crumbling from sadness, perked up at Wilhelm's renewed declaration of loyalty. She turned a glance to the old knight who sat beside her and gasped quietly to herself. She had never seen him with such a hardened expression before. His face, while normally gentle and soft, appeared steely in this moment. His quiet demeanor betrayed the impossible levels of ferocity the old gentleman could no doubt display—that's who the Sword Demon was.

Conwood, finally convinced, suddenly held out his hand for an agreement. "You have my word," he swore, as Wilhelm took and embraced his hand with his own, sealing their contract. "I will have our

units ready before nightfall tonight, and then we will strike when they least expect it—under the cover of darkness, where they feel they have the advantage."

"I thank you... my dear old friend," Wilhelm said, and he truly meant it. "You have been at my side all those years, from our first adventures, to our very last... and for that, you are truly my most irreplaceable friend."

Neither man was a stranger to the dangers of combat, as both individuals together had eons of experience in war and violence alike. They knew the risks of such things, and the rewards which followed. Strangely enough, this time, their actions would fall under official orders of the Kingdom Knights, and it would be a subject of discussion for a long time to come. Yet even if they succeeded, their old tales of adventuring and swashbuckling would be spoken of in even higher regard than before, and they would be known to all—as the knights who just never knew how and when to quit.

"Don't mention it," Conwood replied, laughing to himself. "You know, I've been itching to get into some trouble ever since I took this new position. You don't expect to have me sit back and watch the young ones do all the work, do you?"

"Of course not!" Wilhelm admitted plainly.

Even if the two old knights had differing mindsets, and differing goals in their life, there remained two clear and undeniable truths: they lusted for combat, and lived for nothing else. Between the two of them, their love of adventuring superseded even the highest levels of call of duty. Neither man was a stranger to this feeling, and neither wanted to admit they were even somewhat excited to fight side-by-side once more in the heat of battle.

It seemed to Emilia that Wilhelm and Conwood, sitting together reminiscing about old tales as they were, were bonded together by events and experiences far too complicated for her to understand. It was because of this she let them share their moment together, and dared not to interrupt them.

So, she just gave them her best and most sincere smile, because from deep within her heart, she knew Subaru would be saved by these two legendary heroes.

On the Precipice of Mania

There was a cool, crisp breeze which banished the stillness of the air, causing the elder trees encircling them to animate, woken up from a lasting death of a thousand years. It was the time of the bizarre, when sundown drew near enough to see the darkness swell and stretch, until only wicked shadows remained—and their route lay enveloped in it.

The road to their enemy was quiet. Normally, they would have taken the main passageway up the craggy mountain which grew ever steeper as they travelled, but this was no ordinary stroll up to the scenic peaks of the summit. So, instead, they advanced carefully by way of the wilds and under the protection of the everlasting pines—who danced so spiritedly as their newfound visitors trespassed unwittingly.

Looking behind her, Emilia could no longer see the fading lights of Cramlin twinkling in the darkness. What replaced it, was the ominous gloom of a forest bathed in twilight, and the silence which came with it—save for the rustling of leaves and sounds of careful marching. Above, thin clouds, barely visible in the glow of the young moon, floated lazily over the trees, adding to the eerie feeling deep within her stomach.

Another biting breeze had come up, and it caught the flowing silver locks of her shortened hair in its grasp. Emilia shivered, and considered pulling her hood over her head in order to warm her pointy ears, but ultimately, she decided against it due to the diminished visibility it provided.

In front of her, eight Kingdom Knights including their commander marched stolidly into the darkness, readily alert and ready for any manner of attack—ambush or not. To her side, her close confidant and protector, Wilhelm van Astrea, kept close enough to her where he knew she would be in no danger.

Due to the pathways they took, they had forgone their mounts and travelled on foot, as the element of surprise was more than at play here—which was not surprising, given the fact their small detachment was the central strike team in charge of rescuing Subaru. Instead of barreling straight in with brute force, they were to sneak into the caverns while the other units struck the small cultist camps which surround the domain of Cordor.

They wanted to sneak in, Emilia corrected herself. It was wishful thinking if they expected to walk straight into the proving grounds of the Witch Cult uninvited and undisturbed. Truthfully, she felt a deep pain within her heart, because she knew this wouldn't be just a simple rescue mission; there would be bloodshed, and much of it. Not to mention time was of the utmost importance; so much so every second they spent walking to their destination was another moment Subaru spent under threat of death... or *worse*.

At that thought, Emilia felt a deepening fear aching inside her. She tried hard to quell it, but it was difficult to banish such thoughts from her mind... and within, her anxiety grew ever still—even if her detached and expressionless face remained unwavering.

She turned a glancing eye to the old knight beside her.

During their preparation back at the garrison and before their departure, Wilhelm had come to her in the privacy of her personal quarters. There, he spoke to her, sharing with her encouraging words none other than a person of his stature could give.

They were not words of folly, nor did they intrude on her in any damaging way. They were simply

the parting words of an old knight—one who had borne the pain of loss more than any other, and against all odds, continued on with his life—such as it was. Even though he did not ask of her, she knew that within the pained expression of his journeyed eyes, he wanted her to stay behind and let him fight for her, *alone*. Wordlessly, he contemplated her weary, lilac eyes, and without a sound, he implored her to stray from harm's way.

Pondering on this, Emilia studied the wooden floor beneath their feet silently, before she swallowed her fear, and found her voice.

"I have to go with you..." Emilia said, in quiet anguish, to the old knight who stared back at her with a stony guise. Wordlessly, she took Wilhelm's gloved hand in her own. Seeing the unquestioning look on Wilhelm's face, it almost beckoned her to tears.

He did not waver in the face of her words, and continued to look upon her with understanding.

After a moment of continued silence, Wilhelm focused on the frail, quivering hand which had encased his own, and grimaced, before returning his gaze to her sparkling lavender eyes.

She then swallowed hard, saying, "Because if I don't... how can I ever live with myself?"

Much later, when they had finished their preparations and gathered in the main hallways of old to set out on their journey, Wilhelm approached her once more—this time with a gift.

He loosened his grip, and a chain dangled from his outstretched hand, revealing a bejeweled ring on the end of it. It was gold in color and adorned with a flower insignia. Emilia looked up to him wondrously, before opening her palm to receive the small trinket.

"This ring belonged to my dearest Theresia," he said warmly, as his mind wandered to times of their past. "She left it before departing for her final journey... and she did not return. I want you to have it, as it has no use in the possession of an old man such as myself."

Receiving the gift, Emilia bowed and kept silent, as was proper. She could not speak in this moment, nor did she even know what to say in return for such an offering.

The stillness of the moment lasted longer than she could have wanted, and then Wilhelm, deciding nothing else needed to be said, turned on his heel and walked away without so much as a word.

She nodded gratefully and watched him go. Her mouth quivered slightly, eager to say something, but no words came as his heavy footsteps thundered, even as he stepped silently away; making it clear to Emilia his emotions had finally come to the fore.

Emilia's long, dark eyelashes fluttered as she crept along the hidden pathway. With her mind returning to the present, she reached for the necklace dangling at the base of her chest between her breast. Taking the beloved ring in her grasp, she toyed with it, twisting it between her fingers thoughtfully.

She felt a vast number of emotions as the band twirled effortlessly betwixt thumb and forefinger. Sure, there was the feeling of admiration, but there was always the uneasy feeling of trepidation—a feeling which beckoned her to lose control of herself. She couldn't quite understand why Wilhelm parted with such a close heirloom as this, especially in gifting it this way. But even with what little she understood, there remained the undeniable fact she should accept such a gift earnestly and without question.

Enclosing her fist around the treasured bestowal, Emilia's eyes lidded briefly before opening once more, her soft expression hardening itself as she came to a deeper understanding of her feelings. It

was there—in her steeled countenance—where the features on her face had matured greatly, and the small innocence from her past self had vanished almost unceremoniously.

She heard a light tread, and to her right, from where darkness invited itself into the world, a voice wove the new beginnings of a ballad. She turned to the sound.

"How are you feeling, my lady?" he inquired softly.

"Master Wilhelm?" Emilia murmured. She peered beyond the gloom.

Concealed under the vestiges of shadow, she could only just barely make out the silhouette of the hidden figure. Speechlessly, he came closer into view, revealing himself to her. Contrary to his gentle tone, his serious and unsmiling demeanor bore down upon her as a parent would to his child.

Instinctually, she felt herself avert his probing gaze without the intention of doing so. She paused momentarily under bated breath, before she found the courage to return her eyes to him.

"Tis a worrisome night," Emilia said, her gentle but unsure voice painting what her face could not. "Even so, I am finer now you are by my side."

"Indeed, it is such a night, but do not distress..." Wilhelm said, as he moved silently beside her, unwavering. "...I will not stray from your presence, my lady, and if you ever find yourself separated from me, I implore you to abandon all notions of combat. I say this delicately, but if I have fallen in combat, surely your only respite would be retreat."

Emilia gasped out loud and looked at him pointedly. "Please, don't speak of such things!"

"I only speak truths," Wilhelm said frankly. "If I am to be true to myself, I would fight until I breathed my last for you, my lady. In that respect, I hope—if I am so unfortunate as to fall before you—my wish of your hasty retreat is honored. I care for nothing but the safety of yourself and our mission."

"But, Master Wilhelm—"

"Please, do not worry," he said, smiling as he interrupted her. "This is the task I have taken up as your most loyal servant and protector. I cannot bear to see the one whom I serve fall in combat, and even though I will do everything within my power to prevent such a thing from happening, I want to make my role within your circle very clear."

Emilia blinked in apprehension, and then nodded. "Very well... If that is your wish, Master Wilhelm, then I will honor it to the best of my capability."

Noticing her reluctance to accept such terms, Wilhelm offered her a gentlemanly smile.

"Sometimes, in battle, there is no shame in retreat..." His expression, while reflective, went unnoticed in the darkness and did not reach her eyes. "...And there is no fear in such things either. Sometimes, we must pick and choose our battles carefully, so we may live to fight another day."

Slowly, Emilia turned her eyes away from Wilhelm once again. Biting her lip nervously, she gazed into the darkness once more as she was disturbed by her own doubts. After a brief introspection, she felt a touch on her shoulder, and a *very* light squeeze.

"Do not be afraid, Lady Emilia," Wilhelm said soberly, as he consoled her. "Even if you bring nothing else with you tonight, always do your best to remember above all else, that there is *no* reason to be afraid. Fear is what brings both man and woman to their knees, and to a downfall unbecoming to that of a warrior. Banish your fright, face forward, go without regret, and rip

violently what you want from the world—because it will not be given up so easily without strife."

Emilia smiled in return, even if it was thin. "Thank you," she said politely to the gentlemanly knight who guarded her so. "Your words of encouragement restore my spirit... and my spirit is all I will ever need to overcome such fears!"

Facing forward again, Wilhelm smirked to himself beneath the aged and grayed hairs of his beard. Once more, his expression went unbeknownst to her, even if he did not intend to hide it.

The party had been walking up the winding cliffs and through the crags of the mountain pass for quite some time. As they moved so carefully, the familiar vegetation around them began to finally recede, and soon even the luscious trees became more and more sparse, banishing their natural concealment without warning.

They were getting closer and closer to their destination. Emilia could feel it in the pit of her stomach as they continued up the old and forgotten passageway. It was that eerie feeling she felt quite some time ago in the cursed wood. Even as they travelled, the noises of the insects and the moisture in the air had suddenly faded without cause. They were near now, and that meant they were in extreme danger.

Feeling the otherworldly effects around them, the hunting party began to quicken their pace in response. With concrete reason to make haste, they honed their senses and sought fervently to find the hidden hideout of the Witch Cult.

Emilia could feel herself growing more and more desperate by the second. Suddenly, she beckoned them, and then small, translucent blue orbs dotted the air around her, sprinkling the area in an illustrious blue hue. In her distress, she called upon the lesser spirits, and pleaded with them. Even as she probed their secrets, they would betray no hidden location of the Witch Cult to her, and so they fled in directions unknown—returning to the spirit realm whence they came.

It continued like this for quite some time, as the party searched desperately for the nefarious lair of the Witch Cult. By now, the other detachments must have been engaged in combat at their respective targets, which would mean one thing: The Witch Cult now knew of their impending strike. But still, they travelled without interruption, and ne'er did they cross paths with anyone of any consequence.

A strong gust of wind blew chillily through the sinister night, and the party stepped into a desolate clearing basked by a high moonlight. In front of them were several caverns dug deep into Mount Cordor itself. Indistinguishable from one another, their entrances were bathed in shades which made their contents all but impossible to see.

Lingering behind the rest of them, Emilia adjusted her hood back over her unusual hair and pointy ears to hide her identity once more, and cautiously approached the party.

Settling himself comfortably against a barren tree, Conwood shouldered his massive great sword, deep in thought. After a moment, he set his weapon down and withdrew his pipe from the pocket of his cloak, before striking a match. Bringing the lip to his mouth, small embers smoldered, and brief puffs of smoke blew quickly from his nose as he lit the pipe.

There was a hostile silence as the party gathered around their leader as he casually smoked his pipe.

Conwood looked at Wilhelm with introspective eyes. He then nodded and blew another long string of smoke from his nose.

Wilhelm stepped forward, sword in hand. "These crevices in the mountain are familiar to my old eyes," he said, as he nodded toward the curious formations. "I believe these are the same caverns we explored in our youth. No doubt their roots grow deep into the mountain itself."

A great many years ago, Conwood and Wilhelm had undertaken a quest inside these caverns to rescue some citizens. It was there they encountered the legendary Sandworm of the Augria Sand Dunes, who had made these natural caverns its den and shelter. Undoubtedly, the patriarch of the worm pod was slain and not before long, words of their chivalry and heroism spread throughout Cramlin. Almost half a century later, the Sandworm was nothing but a myth in the minds of the people who inhabited this land.

"They are indeed the same," Conwood said. "If we enter them, we run the risk of getting lost in their tunnels if we do not keep our wits about us."

Wilhelm looked at Conwood expressionlessly for what seemed an unusually long amount of time. "Therefore, we should split up," he said at last, in a stern voice which betrayed no fear. "In order to find whom we are looking for, it is more than likely we will have to cover the entire expanse of the cavern."

"In that case—" Conwood started, before he caught something shining brightly in the corner of his eye.

"Hyuma—!!"

A large sheet of ice erected in front of the knights as a torrent of fire crashed chaotically against it. Like a fragile pane of glass, it shattered into a thousand tiny pieces and sent fragments of it in every direction. Particles of flame conflagrated the area, burning what little vegetation remained in the vicinity, and bathing the area in a low, red light.

As the smoke began to clear, and before anyone else knew what was happening, Wilhelm had already disappeared with a torrent of speed no human eye could possibly follow.

He plunged his blade into one cultist's chest, rending him in two in an almost inhuman display of strength right afterwards with an upward swing. A geyser of fresh blood gushed from the corpse as it split apart in two even halves—and before each section fell to the floor, discarded, Wilhelm had already granted death to two more unfortunate souls.

"Everyone, to arms—!" Wilhelm roared in a bestial fury, as he sank his blade into another enemy without a second's thought.

Emilia, having just recovered from the shockwave of the detonation resulting from her ice barrier against the fireball, readied herself. Shock spread across her face as she witnessed what was happening around them.

An unknown number of cultists surround the area. When had they had gotten there? They could never know for sure, but they were closing in on them, *and fast*. From all directions, cloaked enemies spilled in from the forest, dotting the plateau in dark swabs of a paintbrush. Out of the darkness, large fireballs lit the area in a hellish light as they were flung through the air with wild abandon.

One of those stray balls of fire struck an unlucky knight, engulfing him in an explosion which sent him flying off into the distance. Conwood just stared as the combusted knight tumbled down the mountainside into the darkness until he was out of view.

Enraged, he leapt with the strength of someone half his age and brought his great sword down on the skull of one of the hooded figures, crushing him in a horrendous cascade of warm blood and gore which splattered against his face. Wiping the blood from his eyes to clear his sight, he readied his weapon low for another furious strike just as another cultist lunged at him with a dagger. Catching him midleap, the cultist never knew he died as the great sword lobbed him in two from shoulder to hip, bifurcating him.

"Look alive, men!" he spit into the starry night sky. "There are Witch Cultists encroaching from all directions!"

There was screaming everywhere and a growing pandemonium which began to morph into a deluge of frenzied chaos and destruction. As the battle raged on further, it became less and less clear who would emerge the victor. Even as several cultists were cut down for every knight slain, they continued to flood endlessly from the darkness.

In the distance, a touch of silver flashed as it caught the shining light of the overhanging moon.

A bloodied dagger whizzed through the air near her silver hair, as Emilia ducked just in time to dodge a haphazard strike from a cultist.

"—*El Hyuma!*"

From her pale outstretched hand, a clear pillar of ice shot itself into the cultist square through the chest. A part of the spear jutting out his back was painted red as it nailed him against a tree, letting his blood flow down the rotted stump like a river from his now-lifeless body.

Without warning, she felt a '*thud*' against her side, and instantly the breath was knocked from her lungs. Tumbling against the ground roughly before finally coming to a halt, it took her too long to realize she had just been kicked with a monstrous force unlike any other.

Coughing up blood, a dizzied Emilia sprung back up to her knees, trying to stand. The pain wracked her body only now, letting her feel her cracked ribs and some other internal damage as well. Shakily, she needed both hands to stand back up, and with hazy eyes, she caught the glimpse of her assailant mere seconds before he brought down a killing blow.

"*El Hyuma—!*"

As she panicked, desperate chant escaped her throat once more, mana mixed with blood pooling in her mouth to form a javelin of crimson-red ice. The lance shot through the night sky at a speed almost impossible to dodge, but the hooded figure was also no ordinary assassin.

Turning his body in a mad pirouette both animalistic and devilish in its performance, the cultist effortlessly dodged the incoming ice as it whirled harmlessly by him and crashed into the rocks of the mountain.

Emilia's wearied eyes widened as the wicked figure leapt and roared toward her, its speed one she could not react to in time to defend herself. She raised her hands in folly and slurred an incantation, but it wasn't fast enough...

"——!"

"*Uuuuuuuaah!*"

A roar, and then a steady stream of bright red blood shot out like a jet stream from the headless corpse as it floated through the air comically.

Wilhelm's blade had cut through the cultists neck like warm butter, severing his spinal column and ending his life in mid-swing before he could ever hope to reach Emilia. Its body tumbled to the ground and rag-dolled against the rocky surface of the mountain, sending its body off the cliff and into the darkness below.

Landing gracefully, Wilhelm casually flicked his blade to the side to clean off the freshly-spilt blood with the stroke of a calligraphy brush.

Hastily, he scanned the whole area for both friend and foe, before his eyes settled on the injured girl he had just rescued from a sure and cold death.

He reached out his gloved hand to her. "Are you okay, my lady?" Wilhelm said, a hint of worry laden in his gentle voice.

Emilia coughed, as she wiped a small trickle of blood from her mouth. "I think I'm okay," she said breathlessly. "I just had the wind knocked out of me, but I should be able to keep going..."

She trailed off as she observed Wilhelm's resolute form.

He was almost covered from head to toe in both blood and gore. His normally gray and white hair was now painted red with the life source of his enemies. Likewise, he did not yet appear to have suffered many wounds, but it was difficult to tell what blood was his and what wasn't.

"You really *are* a demon," she whispered quietly.

"You're right," Wilhelm acknowledged, almost chuckling. "But never mind that. Because... there's *much* work to do!"

Emilia just watched as Wilhelm readied his blade and lunged toward a crowd of cultists who were in combat with the other knights. With bated breath, she watched as he effortlessly cut through them, as if he were honing his skills against defenseless stalks of bamboo in his backyard. His primal rage echoed through the dark night, as his shining holy sword cut through enemy after enemy. Its reflective blade glimmered in the moonlight as it danced to and from one body to another indiscriminately and with lust, rage and fury unlike any other.

This man, he was something else entirely... Indeed, he was a demon beyond compare—a man truly befitting of the honorary title which inspired both fear and admiration... and as the Sword Demon dashed from foe to foe, no member of the infernal Witch Cult was spared any mercy as he viciously cut them down without quarter. In between this continual attack, other knights fared well against their adversaries, but their stamina was dwindling.

From higher ground, Emilia watched helplessly as the cult members continuously threw themselves upon her allies with all their might. Their numbers greatly exceeded their own, and soon, she realized this battle was no longer a battle of stealth or power, but one of attrition.

She came to a bitter realization, and if to make it a point, she saw one of the Kingdom Knights fall under the dagger of a genderless and enshrouded foe. His body fell limp to the ground as the cult member plunged his dagger into his back over and over, until surely, the man was dead.

Shock crossed her face and hot tears lidded her gentle lashes delicately.

Coming to her senses, she closed her eyes in focus and channeled the dwindling reservoir of mana she had left—even beginning to tap into her *od* as she felt her well growing more and more barren every second.

Heat began to brim at the edges of her pallid fingertips, and suddenly she felt an overwhelming vastness of energy burst through her gate without warning. The dam within herself ruptured, and out poured an intensity unlike any other. Feeling this new surge of power, she stretched out her arms to draw it into a singular space in the direction of her enemy.

The sizzling tingle of heat bit at her cheeks as a magical fireball erected from nowhere in front of her. Soon, it grew bigger, and before long, the tiny sun beamed radiantly in the darkness as it hovered patiently in front of Emilia. It swelled further, until it grew large enough it dwarfed even her own size, and then she felt something shrink inside herself...

It was ready.

Her eyes shot open, revealing piercing aquamarine pupils leading a determined stare.

"Al Goa—!"

Emilia chanted, her voice a resounding roar as the fireball quaked in her grasp—and then with a synthetic shriek, it was sent barreling toward everyone with no possibility of stopping it now.

As the powerful magic whistled through the darkness, the blackened night sky was suddenly banished in dazzling shades of red. As a result, the oxygen in the air was eradicated as it was sucked callously into the raging flaming meteor, and the thing was no doubt starving.

The shrill call was like music to his ears. Turning his eye briefly, Wilhelm's calm expression warped immediately as he saw what sang so beautifully through the night sky. "Everyone—!" he beckoned to his allies around him. "Take cover, now!"

Conwood and the rest of the knights, taking heed of the warning, broke from their combat trance as the raging ball of fire soared toward them. They dashed behind rocks, jumped over cliffs, and did what they could in order to escape the devastation which was about to meet their battlefield.

Without warning, the ball of fire suddenly separated into several pieces, and mysteriously it homed in on the unfortunate cultists who lay in wait for their untimely end. Some were keen enough to vanish out of sight, with several of them morphing into the shadows themselves and disappearing into the night.

However, not all were so lucky.

The inferno splashed itself against the rocky mountainside cliff of Mount Cordor. Sprawling, endless eternal flames canvassed themselves over every inch of the sacred land, shaping the world into something reminiscent of hell itself. The flames, now penetrating deep into the well-lit sky, spread with ardor even against land which would not normally burn.

Up on the cliff from whence the fireball came, a lone girl lay unconscious on the precipice. After quite some time, she found herself returning to the waking world once more.

Emilia, with her throat burning from the parched air, gasped as she peered down at the devastation. She had collapsed from the infernal spell, the utilization of such a thing irreparably damaging to someone even like herself.

"Did... I... do this?" she whispered shakily as she observed the hellish landscape beneath her.

What remained of a vast number of cultists, was in its place a raging and all-consuming fire which would take hours to burn out. Some who had barely been lucky enough to escape the fiery demise, rolled around on the floor and flailed madly as they tried to extinguish the never-ending flames on

their body. Soon enough, their swinging and thrashing ceased, signifying their passing into the netherworld.

She could not avert her gaze as mournful tears spilled down from her amethyst eyes. Emilia was not keen on taking life, nor did she ever want to, and deeply it affected her so. However, in times like these, when such things were necessary and without ill repute, she had hardened her resolve enough to take such actions.

Wiping the trickling tears from her eyes, she continued to lay splayed out on her knees amidst the chaos and desolation. From all appearances, she was completely lost to the ruin in front of her, as she sat there in a ponderous introspective none could comprehend.

Eventually, she even went unaware of the soft footsteps emanating from behind her.

"Lady Emilia?" Wilhelm beckoned, stepping in carefully from behind her. "Are you injured... Are you hurt?"

His blue eyes beneath thick gray eyebrows had rested upon her unmoving form as she sat there on both knees. There, she remained wordless as she viewed the destruction in front of them, paying no heed to the old man who had called her name.

By now, he had stepped resoundingly in front of her. His stance was just past shoulder length, and he rest one gloved hand on the hilt of his sheathed heirloom of a sword. His giant presence commanded even the attention from the most insane of the world, yet she still stared through him as if he weren't there at all.

With his free hand he reached out to her. "The Witch Cult has retreated down the mountain and into the forest," he said as gently as he could to her. "And... I fear there will be reinforcements on the way, so we must make haste if we are to rescue Master Subaru."

The familiar name called to her in some way nothing else did. Slowly, the gleam in her normally vibrant eyes returned once more, and she blinked. Her eyes flittered unexpectedly, allowing Wilhelm back into her world once more. There, she observed his gentle hand which hovered patiently in front of her.

She shook her head from side to side, no doubt to banish the impending thoughts of her own mind. In taking his hand, he helped her pleasantly to her feet. As he had done so, she broke way from his grasp once more, and then bowed deeply in front of him, guilt overtaking her entire being.

With her voice low and unsure, she murmured, "I am eternally sorry for what I just did!"

Wilhelm then realized what her worry was, and he smiled. "You have nothing to apologize for, my lady," he said as he went to touch her bowed shoulder in comfort. "Your attack was both well-timed and marvelously executed, and it turned the tide of the battle immediately in our favor. If *anything*, I should be apologizing to you for letting the battle get so out of hand."

Feeling his touch and the words of encouragement wash over her, she raised her head once more. "You mean... I didn't injure any of our friends?" Emilia breathlessly asked him, almost afraid of any answer he would give. "I saw the fires stricken upon the land... and I could only have concluded such..."

Nodding gingerly, Wilhelm withdrew his hand from her. "Indeed, by luck or the Dragon's will, we narrowly escaped that ravenous firepit!" he exclaimed. There was a newfound growing pride in his voice. "But forget about that trifling matter... I have never witnessed one weave such a firestorm in

all the years of my long life—and your courage, you must have banished every ounce of your fear in that moment to harness such a power!"

"Oh, I see..." she replied, a wave of instant relief washing over her like a warm summer's current.

She did not even pay heed to his most joyous praise of her abilities. Weakly, Emilia struggled to conceal the fact she was shaking. It wasn't from fear, but from the fragile state of her body.

Noticing this, a more concerned look graced Wilhelm's old features. "Have you spent all of your latent mana?" he asked her out of concern.

"Latent...?" Emilia questioned him in return, but then said, "Ah, yes... I believe so. My head feels so faint right now... and my body hungers for rest even if I cannot get it. I did not mean to release so much of my mana so quickly like that... There is no doubt I lost control."

Wilhelm nodded, and then reached into his bloodstained pouch, before withdrawing a small purple nut.

With great concern, he held out the curious bite-sized morsel for Emilia to take. "As I am sure you are aware, this is a Bokko fruit," he said as he handed it to her. "If you eat just one of these by itself, you should not suffer any long-lasting damage to your gate. Just try not to drink any water for the time being, as it will amplify its negative effects."

Emilia looked at the thing between her two fingers with apprehension. Even if they were an important asset to any magic user, she was not a fan of their taste, or side effects for that matter.

With mild dread, she popped the fruit into her mouth—and to banish its disgusting taste, she swallowed it whole without chewing. After a moment, she felt goose bumps grace her sweaty skin, and the pale thin hairs on her arm stood up in attention. Slowly, the swelling of blood within her head began to clear once more, and she felt herself return to normal once again.

"Thank you, Master Wilhelm!" Emilia said as she bowed graciously to him once more. "You certainly think of everything."

"As any servant would..." Wilhelm replied in short.

Emilia gave him one of her sweet smiles which normally only one other would receive.

She was more than fortunate to have Wilhelm van Astrea as one of her closest allies. Not only was he a force to be reckoned with, but he was also very wise beyond his years. His mind was that of a master strategist; one who had been through battles and adventures innumerable in their quantity. His experience on the battlefield was unmatched, and in times like these, she felt herself the luckiest in the world.

And so she continued smiling at him, as he stepped forward and surveyed the battlefield with perceptive eyes.

Trudging up the rocky hillside of the mountain was Conwood Melahau, followed by three of his knights—the other four having perished unfortunately in the battle just moments before. His blood-splattered great sword was thrown over his shoulder casually. His old armor was battered and dented in, and even charred in some places.

Quickly, Emilia readjusted her hood back over her to conceal her elven ears and silver hair.

Stepping in front of Wilhelm, he turned to the side and took a drag on his pipe and expelled the

smoke slowly without a care in the world.

And as he turned sideways, Emilia could see a crimson-red dagger jutting out of his back near his left shoulder. *He had a knife sticking out of him—?! she thought.*

Letting a cry escape her lips, she dashed over to Conwood and drew her hands near the assailing dagger.

As her hands moved closer to it, he grimaced and pulled away slightly. "Just leave the bastard in there," he said as he let out another puff of smoke. "It's stuck in there good between the bone, and I don't feel like removing it right now."

With confusion spread across her face, she just nodded at him and respected his wishes. She then looked over their party, and realized they were missing almost half of their men.

A feeling of dread blanketed Emilia's thoughts. "We have lost so many..." she said, her voice trailing off as she came to the sudden realization. "Can any of them be saved?"

A very tense period ensued between the six adventurers. Stern expressions took foothold on both Wilhelm and Conwood as they pondered their losses. However, both realized this was just another part of warfare, and they had come too far to let such feelings hinder their abilities now.

With a frown, Conwood affirmed her fears. "They have already passed onto the next life, and their gallantry will be remembered for all eternity. They go before the Divine Dragon in great honor."

Averting her downcast eyes, Emilia said, "I see... and I will pray for their safe journey to the calm and peaceful lands beyond the endless waters of the Great Waterfall..."

The six bowed their heads and paid their respects to the fallen who had given their lives for a cause both selfless and honorable. For just a moment, they would catch their breath before they marched dutifully into the caverns themselves, and finally into the lair of the enemy.

While they did not know what awaited them deep inside the ancient caves, they had a good idea of what to expect from the Witch Cult after their latest battle with them. They had put up a solid fight, and if it wasn't for Emilia's trump card, they would have found themselves overwhelmed and in a precarious situation.

The time was now midnight, and the date of yesterday had now come and gone, carrying with it the hopes and dreams of the past. For a fleeting moment, the party gathered their wits about them, but now they had to set off into the depths of the enemy. Due to their losses and decreased size, they would have to split into groups of two.

As if by careful design, Wilhelm decided he would partner up with Emilia and tackle the first cavern, while Conwood would lead his knights through the second one.

And so the fellowship went their separate ways, and Wilhelm and Emilia found themselves creeping along the long winding corridors of a cavern far forgotten to the world. At first, the pair could see nothing as they traversed areas unknown to the common eye. But after some time, there shone something deep within the darkness, and they found themselves straying toward it like curious bugs to a lamp.

Emilia and Wilhelm stepped nearer to the mysterious green light as its luminescence vibrated almost hypnotically.

"This is indeed lagmite," Wilhelm stated plainly as he stepped closer to the natural light. "If we

follow these crystal structures, we should find ourselves travelling deeper and deeper into the center of the cave. In fact, if my memory serves me well, at the very core of this ancient gallery lies a vast expanse of lagmite clusters—much like where you would find a pyroxene crystal."

Drawing her eyes to the viridian green hue, Emilia curiously analyzed it. "You are right," she said. "Although, this lagmite is not pure enough to be even considered in housing a Great Spirit."

Wilhelm nodded and said, "In recollection, a crystal such as the one you were in search for is originally colorless. It will only take hold of a color once it is impacted by an outside force, whether that be a Great Spirit or something else entirely."

Emilia drew a careful breath and looked around the empty halls for a moment, thinking. She said, "Do you think we are in the right cavern? This place feels so abandoned, like no one has taken these steps in a lifetime."

"I do not know," Wilhelm replied with a hint of disappointment lacing his words. "Even so, we must continue our travels and hope for the best."

She grew quiet. "We must hurry then, Master Wilhelm," she said, almost too quiet for him to hear. Then, in a voice tinged with desperation: "We must find Subaru, and quickly. I feel as if something terrible has befallen him..."

Suddenly, around them, lights of red, blue, green and other colors of the rainbow sprouted up all along the winding walls and ceilings of the cavern. It lit the area brilliantly enough to where they could finally see what was in front of them. And what surprised them was immediately to their left: a massive cliff which seemed to travel down for an eternity.

Stepping back from the ledge, Emilia drew another slow breath and looked around the caverns, now lit by new formations of lagmite. In innumerable colors they twinkled in the darkness, silently taunting the intruders of the cavern.

Then abruptly, a horrendous vibration shook the very foundations of said cavern. The force of it was as strong as an earthquake striking just underneath their feet. In an instant, both Wilhelm and Emilia braced themselves, but only Wilhelm knew what tread their way.

No, it writhed, and crashed against the wall—its massive expanse taking up so much of the cavern the very idea it lived inside this complex was almost laughable.

Wilhelm's sword was already drawn before Emilia could react to their newfound visitor. In a slash too quick to see, Wilhelm effortlessly cut off a piece of the shining lagmite. Picking it up in his left hand, he held it against the darkness to reveal what made such a ruckus.

For an instant, Emilia doubted her own eyes.

It was a worm, yes, but not just any worm. It was a creature of such terrible scale it could have been considered monstrous by even the standards of a giant.

"The Sandworm of Augria..." Wilhelm introduced their new foe, lost in recollection of the memory of a long-lost friend.

The creature was blind. It had no eyes—that was unmistakable—and as Wilhelm shined the light toward its presence, it paid no heed, nor did it shy away from such a thing. In fact, such a creature who bathed himself in an immeasurable darkness for hundreds of years had no use for eyes, and this proved it. Its long and limber body twisted and toured around the curvature of the cavern, making it impossible to see just how long the thing was. It had no arms or legs to help its

squirming body along the surface of the rock—but indeed, it had lengthy, infernal horns which jutted out from above its darkened brow, a shrewd reminder of its vaunted bloodline.

Wilhelm had fought this beast before, he thought—but this one was different. It was larger—*much* larger, in fact, than the one he had fought all those years ago. It was as if it had been tainted by and fed off some dark magic for a century.

Wilhelm's eyes met face-to-face with the worm, and it let out a reverberating wail which threatened to collapse the cavern itself.

"Aaaaah—!"

Wilhelm released a bestial roar of his own and leapt at it with an almost animalistic fury.

Putting all his strength into a hundred furious cuts, his blade met the slippery and flexible skin of the motionless Sandworm in every way possible. However, he found his cuts ineffective as its devilish layer of armor protected it like no other.

But just like the worm's defenses were unbreakable, Wilhelm was relentless in his own way—and still he continued his strikes with all the speed of his youthful self. Every time his blade collapsed against the skin of the worm, he could feel it cut deeper and deeper than it had just seconds before. Soon enough, he finally broke through—and he was graced with the sight of blood spilling into the air.

And the damned worm let out another assailing wail which sent Wilhelm flying back in a shockwave of pure sound.

Overwhelmed by the audible attack, Wilhelm crashed against the walls of the cavern and collapsed to the floor. Catching his breath, he got up and leapt at the worm for yet another furious attack.

Emilia, standing by the wayside, just watched as the man dashed madly toward the worm to strike it down with sheer power alone. At this moment in time, she knew her gate was far too overused to attempt any high-level spell, and no low-level magic would have affected this ancient and terrible creature.

Suddenly, it struck without warning, and its long winding tail which was just moments ago wrapped around the cavern's walls sprung up with a speed unlike anything Wilhelm had ever seen. It came crashing down upon him with the weight of a thousand tons, and he was woefully prepared to absorb such an attack.

Wilhelm let out a bloodcurdling yell of pain as its tail crushed him against the rocks of the cavern.

"—Master Wilhelm!" Emilia shrieked as she saw his crumpled form splay across the ground. He had literally been crushed by the full weight of the thing's tail.

Furiously, she concocted a basic chant, and several ice pillars formed around her from the mana inside her. Following this, she whispered another incantation and the pillars coalesced into a single solid spear of ice. It floated mysteriously above her, ready to strike at any moment.

She was too weak to cast an *Al* level spell immediately, so in her desperation, she haphazardly put one together through other means. While weaker than a true high-level incantation, this would be the best shot she had.

With an outstretched hand she threw the spear into the worm's side, blanketing the area in particles of ice. The worm roared vigorously as it was struck, which made Emilia smile as if she had

succeeded. But as the icy mist of her improvised Hyuma dissipated, the long winding shadow in the darkness moved yet again.

The worm was untouched—and her spell had no effect on the devilish creature. Its skin was as tough as steel, she understood that now. She should have figured, because if Wilhelm had trouble breaking through its skin, what more could she do herself?

Without reason, the worm retreated slightly back around the curvature of the cave, assessing its new enemy. It was a smart beast for certain, as having disabled one of its enemies, it was intelligent enough to understand common battle tactic.

Having fell back around the corner for a moment, it kicked up dust, dirt, and debris, making it almost impossible to see anything in the shade of the cavern. It took a moment for Emilia to accidentally find the limp body of Wilhelm in the darkness of the shadow.

Running her hands over the soft contours of his face blindly, he stirred slightly. "...Lady Emilia?" Wilhelm called weakly into the darkness as he felt her soft hands run gently over him.

"Master Wilhelm!" Emilia yelped as she heard the low growl of his voice. Immediately, she chanted, "—Mana of Water, please grant thy healing!"

Pressing a soft palm down onto Wilhelm's motionless body, warmth spread across him briefly. A small blue light emanated carefully from the palms of her hand, basking him in a bluish hue. As his body came into sight once more, she noticed his left arm had been twisted horribly, clearly broken in several places.

Wilhelm gave her a warm smile as he felt the warmth wash over him, the gentleness of her energy pouring into him like a calmly flowing stream.

Having been completely crushed by the worm, his body was in too much shock to feel any pain. He had not expected such an attack, or else he would have parried it with ease. He realized now why the worm was hiding its length behind the twists and turns of the cavern. It was trying to goad him into striking first, so it could counterattack. It was devilishly smart, indeed.

After less than a minute under the touch of Emilia, Wilhelm sat up.

"Wait, please!" Emilia said. She pressed gently against his chest to lay him back down. "Your arm is not fully healed yet!"

Pushing her to the side, Wilhelm shook his head. "Do not worry over it... I have always fought with one arm anyway. Besides... look what comes this way."

As if interested in the drama happening in front of it, the worm peeked its head around the corners of the cavern once more. Blanketed in darkness, it was almost impossible to see save for the rumbling of its movements and the silhouette it barely eked out.

Propping himself up with his beloved wife's sword, Wilhelm grimaced deeply at the foreboding shadow which stared them down. Turning to Emilia, he said, "Please, go and find Master Subaru..."

Emilia was quiet. "What do you mean?" she asked, almost breathlessly. "You're coming with me too... I shan't leave you here by yourself with this monster!"

"I won't let myself fall to this beast..." Wilhelm said beneath a smirk. "As wounded as I may be, I would never let myself fall in battle. I know I said I would never leave your side, but at this point,

it is too dangerous for you to be around this creature."

Emilia remembered what Wilhelm had told her—that he would never stray from her side. In that respect, he would always be there to protect her, even if he died for her. Yet here, he wanted her to go on without him in order to reach the one they came to rescue. He knew this battle would take quite some time, and with her near, it would be more difficult to worry about the safety of both of them combined. He needed to be alone to fight this one, she realized.

Because that's just how useless she was to him right now. Just like when she was with Subaru.

She gripped his gloved hand and gave him a gentle squeeze. Smiling down upon him, she forcibly said, "Please be careful, Master Wilhelm... I really wish to see your services continue in the foreseeable future."

Wordlessly, he smiled and nodded at her, before he stood up straight as if he were never wounded in the first place. With a terrible glint in his eye, he glared at the monstrous hidden demon beast with the fury of a demon himself.

He knew he would be victorious against such a creature, but how long it took, or how he would manage it, were questions which he's not sure of the answers to. Yet, he did not have time to ask these questions, nor did they have the time to squabble with a mindless beast such as this while Subaru still drew breath.

He would finish this meaningless battle as quickly as permitted.

With a flick of his blade, he leapt at the shadows once again and Emilia watched him vanish into the darkness. She heard his bestial cries of anger as he fought with the grotesque creature, and she heard the wails of the worm and the rumble of the cavern as it banged itself against the walls indiscriminately, even though she could no longer keep the two combatants in her sight.

Turning on her heels into the other direction, she ran.

And she ran as fast as she could, because she knew of nothing else other than to find her Subaru—the one person she had come all this way for. And so, she travelled along the cavern walls, following the lagmite crystals as Wilhelm had advised her, and before long, the crystals grew in quantity and expanded in size. No longer were they mere tiny clusters near the entrance to the cavern—now, they were massive literal sprawling hives gleaming brightly and magically among the darkness.

By now, her footsteps were the only sounds which emanated throughout the cavern. She took them carefully as she crossed a winding pathway adjacent to a cliff. One misstep, and she'd have her earlier curiosity of how deep this cliff fell answered. So, she trod more than carefully, hugging the wall and following the glimmering lagmite crystals.

After quite some time, the narrow passageway lifted and expanded into a larger one. As she walked along it, she came across something she did not expect.

There were two corpses on the ground. The shadowy black-robed figures were unmistakable in their identity, even if they were well hidden from sight.

Walking up to one of the corpses, Emilia inspected it curiously. There were no visible wounds on the cultist, no blood, no *anything* which would make it obvious the individual was truly dead. Yet, the cultist laid sprawled out against the cavern floor as if they had been thrown and left there to die.

As she looked over the robe of the cultist, she suddenly hatched an idea.

Quickly, she removed their robe and undergarments. The person under the robe came into view, revealing the lifeless face of a brown-haired woman maybe a little bit older than herself. Cultists came from all walks of life, and even someone who appeared normal such as her could have held a sinister secret all along.

Carefully, Emilia took the accursed robe and put it on over her own garments, disguising herself perfectly with the addition of this cave's depth and darkness.

Leaving the two lifeless bodies where they lay, Emilia continued along the well-lit pathway of the cavern, until finally she came to something she knew was out of the ordinary.

Rusted bars jutted up from the stone in the ground and into the rock above, sealing the area beyond it off entirely. With the remains of two cultists close by, she realized this was no mere coincidence.

She felt a nervous tingle echo throughout her belly.

Silently, she stepped up to the rusted bars and pressed her hands to it. As her soft hands caressed the peculiar bars, she felt something uneasy within them. She searched deeper, and deeper, before she found her answer: It was an illusion.

In realizing this, she focused her mana deep into the bars themselves before they began to fade out of sight. Soon, their transparency turned to nothingness, and within her own grasp the bars ceased to exist entirely.

Stepping through the crevice in the wall, Emilia was met with a most deterring sight.

There was a large amount of lagmite clusters in this massive expanse of a chamber, yes—but they were all a nefarious blood-red. The entire chamber was painted in scarlet... and it wasn't just the red color which unnerved her—it was the vibrating luminescence of it in the rhythm of a heartbeat.

Peering into the darkness, Emilia squinted. Vaguely, just past the crystals, near the ledge of a cliff, she could just barely see a figure cloaked in a long, black robe. Whoever it was had their back turned to her, and it stood there motionlessly, unaware of her intruding presence.

Quietly, she stepped over to the hidden figure. She didn't make as much as a single sound as she moved closer and closer to the unknown individual. In preparation, she readied the palm of her hand as she moved toward the unmoving figure cloaked in darkness. Ready to strike at a moment's notice, she stepped as close as she could get to identify him.

Though, as she got closer, she could hear something vague in the distance coming from the hooded figure.

It sounded like a chant.

The familiar voice echoed in the shadows, "All that remains, is my jealousy..."

Its sound was familiar, yes, but how the words were spoken was as unfamiliar as the most mysterious stranger.

She focused on the odd but familiar individual. She couldn't pinpoint what unnerved her about him, but it didn't matter, because she would soon find out.

Her footsteps thudded around as it was caught in the echo chamber of the cavern, undoubtedly revealing her presence to whoever lay beyond the darkness.

However, he didn't move a muscle in response. He continued to stare away from her into the darkness of the ravine in front of him. His chanting had stopped, and he was now wordless as he peered into the pit of nothing. After a moments silence, she heard it again:

"I have her love..."

Emilia's eyes widened. She knew that voice could be no one else.

"Subaru...?" she called to him nervously.

As her gentle voice echoed through the vast expanse of the cavern, the cloaked boy finally stirred. Turning slightly, he peered at her in his peripheral vision, and on his darkened features, she could see he was smiling.

"Subaru—!"

Emilia yelped as she immediately recognized the soft features of his face. In excitement, she jumped to him and threw her arms around him, almost sending him off the ledge of the cliff.

He returned her embrace as she collided into him, catching him off guard. She buried her face in the crook of his neck and whispered sweet things into him, tickling him, although he did not stir.

Briefly, she pulled away and said, "Oh, *my* love! My lovely Subaru! I was *sooo* worried about you... I had missed you so much!"

In response, Subaru just smiled softly and looked her straight in the eye.

Looking him over, her happy smile curved backwards slightly, almost to a frown. She could tell something about him had changed significantly. Even though they had been separated for only a day, it was almost like he was an entirely different person.

His usual tan complexion was now colorless, and sickly-looking... and his normally hazel eyes were now almost a different color entirely. They were... gray? No, maybe it just appeared that way in the darkness which surround them. They were now far enough away from the reddened lagmite to stray handily into the shadows.

But still, she felt there was something so different about him, but she could not pinpoint it to any singular detail. It was almost as if his entire being had changed in some odd way, but she couldn't quite put a finger on it.

"Subaru..." Emilia said. "Is there something wrong? Are you injured in any way? Did they hurt you, or do something to you? Please, let me know so I can help you."

Subaru just shook his head negatively, and said, "No, there is nothing wrong with me. In fact... if you are with me, everything in the world is exactly the way it should be."

"Oh, Subaru..." she whispered to him breathlessly in response. "We have been separated for only a day, but it has felt like an eternity for me... I'm so glad you are safe!"

Subaru stared at her with a big grin on his face. "For once, you and I can come to an agreement," he said, reaching around with his hand to stroke her nape. "I don't ever want you to leave; in fact... I want you to be next to my side like this, *forever*. So please, don't leave me anymore."

Emilia felt tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm never going to leave you, Subaru!"

She now sobbed gently against him, as he stroked the back of her head lovingly. She felt like she wanted to cry for hours. She realized if she was with Subaru like this, even crying felt good. And in this mood, deep within an ancient cavern inside a mountain as old as time itself, she felt it fitting they shared this moment together, as ill-timed and poorly conceived as it was.

With a conscious effort, Subaru pushed himself against her, and in a moment's notice, their lips collided as one.

She thought they would never kiss like this again. Deep within her heart, over the past day, she had silently been mourning Subaru. Even if she did not want to admit it, she had feared the worst for him, and already, she was feeling the effects of it.

So now, to be mashed against him like this in a ravenous whirlpool of emotions, she felt herself slipping. Even sober as she was right now, she felt the undying need to break down the physical and emotional barriers between herself and Subaru.

And so, she kissed him full upon the lips without ever wanting to disengage. While exploring his mouth, she felt herself trip and both she and Subaru fell to the rocky floor without a care in the world.

Subaru was already lost in whatever lustful emotions he was feeling right now. She could feel his hands snaking up under her darkened robe to delve deep wherever they wanted. And she didn't care where he touched her, not here—not now. Even though he had felt so foreign to her just moments ago, his kiss and physical touch reminded her of a Subaru she had already experienced so many times before. His need was the same, as was the artform of his lovemaking.

Within their hazy stream of emotions, they found their clothes discarded lazily to the side, and she lay over Subaru, naked and wanting. Her cheeks were painted beet red as he delved into the cream of her neck once more, leaving small, careful bites along the way.

The entire world was lost to the two as they shared in the heated passion of lovemaking on the cold cavern floor. Forgotten to them were the battles which had just transpired, and the battles which were still happening even as they made love. The only thing which remained was a hazy reflection of *their* world together; the only one which mattered. It was the one she and Subaru shared together—and the one they had just come so *close* to losing forever.

Subaru pressed himself against Emilia with more lust than anything now, as he had completely lost himself into the pleasures of her body. She too, paid no attention to such trifling matters anymore, as she abandoned the world of the emotion for the world of the physical.

She was swamped in pleasure now, and he too, as he made love to her as if it were the last night they were ever going to share together. Even if it went unknown to Emilia, that was how Subaru felt in this moment, because in his nadir, she had returned to him sooner than he could ever have hoped.

It was all he dreamed of, as he stood there endlessly, staring into the darkness below. To the average person, it appeared as if he were looking at nothing—just a bottomless pit leading to nowhere.

But in that darkness, he saw one face and one face only.

He saw *her*.

Deep within the throngs of their love and passion, Emilia did not even hear Subaru as he

breathlessly whispered the name '*Satella*' into her ear.

Demons

Emilia lay on the ancient, uneven ground of the timeworn cavern, looking up at the curious performance above her, watching the now vibrant and sparkling radiance of the crystals paint a picture of sprightliness. At careful intervals, did the amalgamation of colors cast new sights one after another, inviting her into a chimeric dream far removed from her disparate reality.

It was a night which began a nightmare, before ending on the fringes of a tempestuous storm of passion.

From beside her rest a motionless form, and apart from the repetitious tune of light, rhythmic breathing, she could perceive no other sound emerging from it. Turning onto her side and with steady eyes, Emilia mindfully studied the silhouetted figure, her eyes straining at the mercy of dangling crystals from the ceiling casting a palpitating light.

It had been a long night, but even as the waning moon passed unwittingly into the next day, the lingering passages of time went forgotten to her. No more did the concerns of the outside world bear any meaning—of her friends, and even Wilhelm van Astrea, too—the elder warrior who was left in the darkness to do battle alone. Indeed, her world seemed much smaller as she gazed longingly at the unabashed sleeping features of her lover next to her.

She reached out a quivering hand to touch him. With the virtuosity of a skilled musician, her lean and slender fingers brushed over his cheek and with meticulous precision, they toured up the side of his face to brush the lengthened bangs from his lidded eyes. Now exposed, Emilia felt her expressionless lips curl to a small smile as she viewed his peaceful sleeping visage. She dared not wake him, and she would have risked the world if it were solely to keep him in his tranquil state for just a moment longer.

When she had come to him hours ago, in his stead, she found someone who she did not completely know. As well as she knew her Subaru, she doubtlessly understood the person lying next to her was Subaru no longer, but someone who had been irrevocably changed in ways she could not yet comprehend. Deep within her, she felt dread, and in it, she found herself afraid to trouble him once more, to stir him from his sleep. Underneath his peaceful guise, Emilia surmised he was suffering something so terrible... and worst of all, he was suffering it *alone*.

She couldn't be there for him, as usual.

It was because of this she prayed for him more fiercely than ever before.

Praying that whatever dark forces assailing him would diminish, and his colorless and grey eyes would return to their former spirited splendor shades of brown. For the Divine Dragon to protect and guide him to serenity under the safeguard of his ever-expansive wing. Praying —though she knew her desperate invocations would go unanswered—for her Subaru... *her hero*, to return to her in the state before their separation.

Emilia instinctively reached to finger his cheek once more. Her pallid fingertips, so careful not to wrest him from his slumber before, now nudged him with a forcefulness formerly repressed by the last remnants of her self-control. In her desperate touch, she felt the softness of his skin, the warmth of it—and in response, a dizzying heat singed her cheeks whilst blood rushed and spread across her face as she relinquished all notions of restraint.

Here, at the edges of her own rationality, she could resist the urges which swelled within her no

longer. Her lust for him was as potent as the most intoxicating drink, and certainly more exhilarating than anything she had ever felt before. She wished for nothing more than to *feel* those emotions again... to feel his hands run over every contour of her body... to feel his needful lips as he pressed them against all the forbidden areas of her body... and to feel all of him as she surrendered her purity to him, again, and again, *and again*.

The needy palm of her hand spread itself eagerly across his cheek, and her eyes turned downward from his lidded own as they explored his body from top to bottom. She devoured him with her hungry leer, and she could just withstand her yearning to taste him there and then.

Her intemperate gestures did not go forgotten.

As if her longing for him was palpable enough to beckon, she felt an intruding hand caress her own. She turned to the source of the unexpected touch, and her amorous lavender eyes found themselves gazed upon by a grey and silent stare.

"You're still here?" he said.

Emilia did not speak, but the pale glow of the crystals showed her anxious and hopeful eyes above a small smile. She entangled her fingers with his own, and out of habit, she drew their hands carefully and rest them on her lap.

Subaru watched her attentively, enthralled by her every movement. Even if she were enveloped in a shadow no eye could see through, he would not draw his own away from it. She captured every second of his attention, every waking moment, and even the entirety of his dreams.

She had been there as he slept just moments before. There, he saw her shortened ashen hair glowing as a beacon in the darkness... her marvelous amethyst eyes as she gazed listlessly back at him... and he etched every twist and curve of her shapely body to his soul, so he may never forget. His sleep was so restful—so filled with peace and harmony—he realized he could never exist without her by his side.

The sounds of her uneven and exhilarated gasps are all which filled his mind now. As she lay next to him covered by nothing but a thin, black robe, he found himself creeping ever so closer to her, and she waited for him.

Sometime later—it could have been mere seconds, or even hours—Subaru's free hand finally rested itself across her rose-colored cheek, his other one cupped around her smooth, yet firm and round bottom. Her expression softened, and her breathing slowed. Subaru looked into those wonderous lavender eyes, and as they reflected the everchanging light of the crystals, he found himself staring into enchanted waters both impossibly light and infinitely deep. He dared not speak a word as she curved her face inward and kissed him lightly upon his palm.

The sounds of her gentle kisses filled the cavern air as her trembling lips departed his skin one after another in light pecks of love. She turned his palm over and then began her work on his fingers, and from thumb to little finger; she left none without the tenderness of her love. After a moment, she broke away from him and lay back, displaying her hidden body to him. With all the allure of a siren, her hand hovered teasingly near her exposed collarbone, her legs slightly spread apart. As she saw him gaping at her with a lustful desire she had never seen before, she let a small, playful smile grace her rosy lips.

Taking the robe-turned-blanket between her thumb and forefinger, she stared back at him with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Is this what you want, Subaru?" she whispered, as she pulled the cover down far enough to expose the supple dip and curvature of her breasts.

Every syllable tickled him mercilessly, as if she were speaking those words against his bare skin. He was wordless as she bewitched him under her spell, and he found himself craving her taste more so than ever. And *that tightness*... There was that painful tightness underneath his robe, one he so desperately needed to release.

As if responding to his muted request, the robe slid off her voluptuous body and onto the cold cavern floor below.

Subaru's mouth turned bone-dry as his sex stood to a brimming, painful erection within the confines of his darkened robe. In front of him, she lay enticingly on display with every inch of her perfection in full view. Her now exposed pale white skin glittered in the darkness wondrously, as if she were never meant to be there at all, and her soft, pink nipples called him to her in such a way he could not resist.

Without warning, he leapt at her and captured one of those pink nubs between his teeth, and as he suckled them as if he were a babe himself, he felt them lengthen and harden receptively.

She made a small unexpected sound, and went rigid for a mere second before softening in his grasp. Euphoria spread across her entire body as she drew an awkward, excited breath, and then she shifted herself into him as best she could. She gasped again as she felt the keen sensation of his teeth bite at her breast, and the soft warm feeling which followed as he twirled around her with his tongue. For a moment, she lost herself in an astonishment of pleasure, and she murmured *something*, almost soundlessly into his ear, without knowing what it was.

"Oh, Subaru!" she moaned thoughtlessly, assailed by newfound feelings. "That's... *Oh*... Such a thing, it's... Ah—!" Whatever words she wanted to part with him were lost as she twisted and turned against feelings unimaginable.

Settling against her, his mouth mournfully departed from her breast and found itself snaking its way up the ivory of her collarbone, to her neck and finally to the lobe of her pointy ear as he left small, deliberate bites along the way.

"You don't know how much I love your ears," Subaru whispered breathlessly, his hot breath stimulating her enough to elicit goose bumps across her glistening skin. "Every part of you is flawless... and every inch of you has my love as much as the next..."

Emilia shut her eyes as she felt him nibble her ear in such a way she never thought it possible. Her ears were the damnable sign of her lineage, and in the past, she wanted nothing more than to cut them off herself if she could muster the courage enough to dare. But now, as he demonstrated such love and admiration for such a terrible thing, the action resurrected feelings lamented for half a millennium.

There was a brief silence and break in their wanton foreplay as Subaru hovered hawk-like over his prey. Emilia continued staring forward as she could feel his hot, even breath splash itself across her skin every few seconds. She dared not turn and face him, for he would undoubtedly notice the tears of happiness brimming her vibrant pools of lilac.

This abashed joy throbbing in the deep core of her heart told her all she needed to know about what was currently happening. Even if this were the last moment the two would ever spend together, she could pass into the netherworld without regret—knowing full well she chose who she gave herself to wisely, in all body, mind and soul. She desired him more than he could ever know, and in almost losing him, her love for him was reaffirmed tenfold. She was clearheaded in this moment; both sober and without any outside influence over her mind other than the perfervid levels of love enrapturing her.

Subaru's grey eyes narrowed as he saw her trembling silently in the darkness. He was too close for such feelings to go unnoticed.

Gazing calmly out into the darkness, Emilia whispered into the damp air of the cavern:

"My beloved, please take me again..."

The request hadn't even fully registered in his mind before he found himself straddling her nude body.

Before she knew what had happened, Subaru had discarded his robe to the side, pressing their bare bodies against one another as they surrendered themselves to carnal desire. With heightened senses and dilated eyes did she stare back at his lustful gaze wondering what he would do next.

It didn't take long for him to decide.

He twisted his head sharply and their lips met again for what felt like the first time. With diligent attention to detail, his caressing hand travelled from her breast, down to her firm naval and past her womanly hips, before finally resting on the silky-smooth cream of her supple thigh. There, he gripped her, and with urgency, he hoisted her up so her bare feet dangled helplessly in the air.

She gasped as her fingers locked and twisted in the dark tufts of his hair. Their lips met once more with an avidness—a hunger which almost drew blood as the flame burning between the two stoked and billowed until it was a bonfire.

Never, ever, had she felt such feelings before.

Suddenly, Emilia could feel his hand smooth over the thin, white hairs above her groin as if he were admiring them, and then he pressed himself against her wetted sex. Slowly, she felt him enter her. She gasped, before she sunk her teeth into his shoulder and clawed at his back until they drew red, bloody lines. Subaru kept a slow rhythm, pressing in deeper every so often, equally teasing her by pulling out nearly the exact same length. It wasn't until a few dozen more tepid thrusts did she feel his length reach the deepest folds of her flesh... and all else was blown over.

She felt her body grow more comfortable with his girth, and she knew *he* knew it from his quickening thrusts. The heightened tempo nearly numbed her mind from the terrific sensation, the inside of her skull pounding with the exact same power as what her loins felt. Amongst her own pleasure, she could feel his need and panicked desperation for a release, his member engorging and trembling innocently.

He let out moans of satisfaction of his own against her pointy ear as he took her with an aggression formerly unseen. He strained himself in his exertion, groaning bestially; their body heat joining in unison, and before long, both she and Subaru were damp from sweat.

In a hazy recollection she remembered the first time they had made love. The details in her mind were blurred, and the feelings lost as if experienced during a long-forgotten dream. For an instant, Emilia thought she understood. She struggled hard to realize why things were happening as they were—but as quickly as the realization came to her, it was lost.

Everything was gone; all semblance of thought eradicated through feelings of pure gratification and fulfillment. Her memories, too—her remembrance of the world beyond her lover, vanished like a cool breeze through the moonlit night sky.

And what remained of it was a vague dream.

She cried out as she climaxed. Her hands slid along his back, and then fell weakly to the side; her shapely legs, which had unknowingly coiled behind his hips, tightened stronger than the giant worm she encountered earlier, urging him to explore deeper inside her—her pleasure obliterating all semblance of control.

Hearing her cries as she shuddered against him, Subaru's excitement was sent to a new level. Using the discarded robe as a cushion and never parting from their union, he flipped her onto her side and thrust into her even harder. Emilia's eyes were tightly shut, and she mouthed something to him even though no sound came.

Feeling her satiated sex tighten around him, Subaru began to drive himself into her faster and faster, as if he were trying to drive away all the hurt and all the pain they had suffered together. His own climax came hard as he released himself deep inside her, bucking his hips wildly in accordance to her folds' accepting pulse. Its powerfulness wracked his body so much it made him forget even his own name.

His strength ebbed away along with his orgasm, though he still had the countenance to avoid flopping shamefully on top of her panting body. Trembling like a newborn foal, he controlled his upper body around her, half-cradling her with his admittedly average muscle mass, before snuggling his face to the side of her neck and finally hugging her naked and unmoving body from behind fully.

There they lay, quiet in each other's arms, as no words needed to be shared between the two.

After quite some time, Emilia rolled over onto her other side, so the two were now facing each other.

He felt her fingers rest against his heaving chest and glide alongside his skin, as he gazed breathlessly into her otherworldly eyes. Her playful touches escalated, and soon, she began to leave small, light kisses all over his body—from his chest, to his sides, down to his belly, and further down until he could describe no more.

As Subaru craned his head forward, he was graced with the stunning view of her bare rear as she bent over him, playfully kissing his lower extremities. He reached out and gave the bottom of her thigh a light squeeze, which pulled her attention away from what she was doing.

Turning her head, she gazed at him with curiosity laden on her expression and a mischievous glint in her eye. His grey eyes, even before she spoke, had been curiously light, livelier than she had ever seen them in their new state.

"What do you think you're doing?" she squirmed. "You know I'm ticklish, don't you?"

Alert in the twinkling light amongst the darkness, Subaru smiled at her. How impossible was it to him this beautiful and ephemeral girl was currently bestride him, naked and exposed in all her immodesty.

"I do, but that's the point," he replied as she crossed over to him, giving a final agonizing teasing peck to his loins, and snuggled up by his side. "And you don't seem to be too bothered about it, huh?"

Emilia gave him a lewd smile. "I *certainly* am bereft of complaints as of right now..."

She leaned in to kiss him on the nape of his neck, eliciting a joyous laughter from his lips. "Oh, *my* lovely Satella... Please don't, that tickles—"

Abruptly, her kissing ceased, and Subaru felt her shudder against him.

Slowly, she drew her face back from the warm comfort of his skin, and the two stared at each other as bewilderment spread itself across her face. Her gentle amethyst eyes were now as wide as saucers, and her pupils were pinpoint as she gaped at him, mouth slightly ajar and wordless.

"Is there something wrong?" Subaru asked, as he closed the distance between them. "I didn't say anything inappropriate... right?"

Stepping back away from him, she continued to gaze at him in confusion. She narrowed her eyes as he looked questioningly at her, asking if he had done her some great wrong. But still, she stayed silent and found herself unable to reply to him, as her tumultuous thoughts were unthinkable to turn into audible words.

Subaru was deeply stirred. Her lack of response made him feel a darkness in the pit of his stomach he could not banish. *Is she upset at me? Did I do something she did not like?* He ran these questions over and over in his mind as he struggled to conjure an apology for a mistake he had no knowledge of.

She continued to move away from him as he stepped toward her.

Subaru saw the pain painted over her gentle features. He gasped, and then echoed the forbidden name once more—and in his voice, there was a desperation unlike any other:

"Satella..."

As she heard him call her by that vile epithet of a name one more time, she froze and averted her sight from his own. In response, Subaru dropped his shoulders in resignation when he saw how his words broke her for reasons he could not understand.

Emilia's eyes narrowed at him in thought as she viewed his crestfallen state. He had called her 'Satella' not once, but *twice*.

It was for certain, then; she realized he had not made a mistake. His words were true and without malice. She could this see reflected in his weary eyes and the somberness of his expression. His feelings were genuine, and in her heart, she knew he believed her to be the Jealous Witch, and not *Emilia*.

She reached up to grasp the lonesome ring dangling wistfully from her neck.

Her mind wandered sorrowfully in thought: In the moments they just shared together, and as they made love, did he believe himself to be making love to someone else, and not herself? The mere musings of it shattered her heart into a thousand tiny fragments. A mixture of emotions assailed her, and suddenly she felt very lightheaded. The world spun and rocked, and then everything went blank, her body falling forward onto the cavern's slippery floor.

Expediently, Subaru stepped with an inhuman-like speed, and she fell limp into the protective grasp of his arms. "Satella, are you okay...?" he whispered as he brushed the silver bangs from her eyes. "Are you feeling unwell? Is there anything I can do to help you?" Such words of worry went unheard to her as she lay softly in his arms, completely unresponsive and unaware.

In time, she felt the overwhelming sensations of the waking world return to her.

As her eyes lidded open, she found herself under the watchful gaze of two piercing grey orbs. Realizing she was in the arms of Subaru once more, she froze up, laying still and playing dead.

Eventually, with a stony silence, she looked up at him, the surprise on her face clear as day for all to see.

It was an impressive feat he caught her as fast as he did—maybe *too* impressive for the Subaru she knew to achieve. Surely, he was athletic and limber, but the speed he needed to move in order to catch her at that distance was almost akin to the protection of the wind instead of human reflex.

Subaru helped her to her feet, making sure to hold her hand gently in case she stumbled once more. As she stood, she balanced herself and then let out a deep breath. Still nude from their coupling just moments prior, she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered as the biting coolness of the cavern began to take hold. Noticing this, Subaru led her over to where their clothes rested on the cavern floor.

"Let's get dressed so you don't catch a cold, alright?" Subaru said, picking up her discarded undergarments and robe with an outstretched hand.

Emilia nodded in response. "I am very grateful... I don't know what came over me. I suppose I have not had anything to drink since this forenight past..."

Subaru dressed himself in his dark garb as she spoke. "Then we must find you some," he decided, adjusting the cuffs of his sleeve. "Now that you have finally returned to my side, I believe it's time we leave this place. With *our love*, we should have no problem getting out of here."

"The very same," Emilia replied with a hint of sadness weighing down her voice. Listlessly, she pointed to their right. "Behind us lay a crevice tucked between the walls. If we make our way down that way, we should find our exit."

Subaru smiled as he pushed a hand through his hair. "So, you want to escape the conventional way, huh? Say, why don't you teach me how to materialize myself through the shadows like you always do? Even if it's boring, that seems to be the most ideal method of travel around here."

Emilia fell silent. She looked at him, but she could find nothing sincerer within herself to answer his question. Instead, thinking she should just go along with it, she said, "It would take you too long to master such a technique, so for now, we should travel by way of foot. Besides, you wish to spend more time with me, don't you?"

He smiled at her then, widely. Beneath his pale and tired guise, his face was as young as ever. "It's a date, then!" Subaru said, his cheerful voice eerily echoing the memory of his former self. "I can't wait for you to teach me new powers for me to use. You know I want to be able to protect you the best I can!"

It seemed almost a silly thing to hear. As she questioned herself whether this person was really Subaru or not, she suddenly realized her fears were unfounded. She knew not why he believed her to be Satella, or why he had seemingly forgotten her real name—or even her existence—but even if she did not have answers to those questions, one thing remained certain.

The one who stood before her was, without question, *her* Subaru.

And now, finally, she did understand. She knew Subaru loved her whether she was the Jealous Witch, Satella, or the half-elf, Emilia. In the end, it didn't matter. Regardless of who she was, he would love her in the same, full way he always did.

In those silvery eyes of his, she saw a liveliness which breathed and lived only for her, and her alone, regardless of *what* her name was.

Satella smiled somberly. "I know you do," she said, almost soundlessly to where he may not hear. "Soon, I *promise*... I shall teach you everything, and before long, there shan't be any secrets between ourselves."

He smiled in return, and then looked over to her as the darkened robe fell from her waist to cover her creamy legs. He saw her blush under his watchful eye, before saying, "That's exactly what I needed to hear from you. Your words of love... they are all I desire. Please, don't ever leave me... Satella."

She swallowed and nodded. "I shall not..." 'Tis a promise I shall never break."

Subaru's smile turned to a grin. "That's not a bad vow to take. I look forward to the time we'll share between us, as it's been foretold. For now, I think we'll have to break our conversation at this moment, as we're running low on time."

Satella collected herself and looked inquisitively at him. He was staring off into the darkness where the entrance to the cliff was. To satisfy her curiosity, she wished to ask what he meant regarding 'their time had been foretold', but hesitated. The words never came and were lost to her, as she noticed his kind aura had become both dark and grave.

Subaru turned to her. "We must hurry, Satella," he beckoned her as he held out his hand for hers to take. "They will be here soon..."

"Who shall be here soon?" Satella asked. She glanced quickly past him into the darkness, but saw nothing. Hesitantly, she took his hand, and with little warning, she felt a raging river of power flow into her. She gasped, the shock threatening to stop her heart.

"Careful now," Subaru laughed quietly to himself. "Our connection to one another might be *too* strong now."

She panted hoarsely, more startled than anything else.

Subaru continued smiling at her nonchalantly. His grasp around her small, frail hand began to tighten, and with gentility he guided her to his side. After a moment, whatever power pouring from his gate began to subside, and her heartbeat slowed to a normal pace.

And Satella *knew*—knew in that moment with an utter and absolute certainty—this new Subaru was more different than she could have ever imagined. It frightened her, to feel the power outpouring from the palms of his hands as it did, but even amongst that fear, she found herself in awe. It wasn't anything like she had ever felt before. It wasn't the usual warm sensation of mana which washed over her like the surge of ocean waves. It was much more powerful than that; all-encompassing, even, as if his power were the peerless shadows which overtook the land each and every night.

Satella shut her eyes, and then reopened them anew—even though it went unnoticed—indeed, something had changed within those gentle orbs. Before, they glittered innocently and childishly in the darkness. Now, they were knowing, complex and fulfilled, with a tinge of an insatiable, yet alien longing. It was a simple curiosity and a yearning born of the look in her eyes, and they hungered for *more* of whatever she just felt.

"Our connection was always strong," she whispered breathlessly into the darkness. "It just eluded my understanding until this very moment... but now I can feel the tingle of it, its potency lifting all the weight off my shoulders."

"Believe me," Subaru replied as he looked upon her in a new light. "I know *exactly* what you mean —"

Abruptly, Subaru lurched forward, his speech interrupted, as his hand shot to his temple to assuage a striking pain. His entire body was trembling in pain, hyperventilating to where Satella nearly screamed and scurried up to him in confusion. However, his free hand pushed her worry away gently.

"Are you well, Subaru?" she asked, incredibly concerned.

"I'm fine..." he muttered, pain evident in his voice. "There's nothing wrong with me, we just need to get going—and fast."

He looked away and took a step toward the exit. Turning his head to the left, he noticed Satella watching him as she followed quietly behind. In just seconds, they approached the crevice in the wall, and he could see nothing past it as the cavern had darkened significantly. The crystals, formerly glowing with life, had been silenced like the dwindling flame of a melted candle.

There was a sudden, frightening silence around them. And then, an immediate rush of sound. They looked at each other for but a mere second.

"Get down—!!"

Subaru's warning barely escaped his lips before a wild explosion rocked them. Shards of scorched rock were sent in every direction as they received the full brunt of a highly destructive spell conjured only to kill.

Smoke and dust erupted into the air, before the tumbling of rock and flame came to a rest.

Subaru, standing up and getting his wits about him, looked around in panic for his lover. His ears were ringing and his eyesight blurred, but he strained himself to focus. His eyes darted through the noxious fumes and haze, and as his lungs breathed it in, he felt himself turning sick. He began to cough hoarsely, but still, he pushed through the thick, sooty smoke. Briefly, his eyes caught a glimpse of a small shine within the darkness, and he found himself drawn to it. He threw himself over the motionless body and pulled it into his arms.

Her head fell limp against him as she came into full view of him.

"Sa-Satella..." Subaru uttered. "Satella... you can't leave me already..."

He ran his fingers up and down her charred face, hoping with all his might his touch itself could breathe the life back into her lifeless body. Half her face had been burnt so badly it was unrecognizable, and her doll-like eyes were dark and lifeless. A mixture of bright red and dark blood streamed down her torso, covering him in it. He tore madly at her robe to reveal deep and seemingly fatal lacerations caused by the shrapnel of rock from the blast. In desperation, he pressed his palm against her gaping wounds in order to plug the bleeding, but it kept pouring like a geyser, eager to spend everything in it until no more could be spent.

Subaru let himself weep. Words would not—could not—come to him as he held his fair maiden as she passed into the next life. He wanted to speak, but his trembling lips failed to form the words. So, he cried, and cried, as he buried himself into her now cold and lifeless skin.

"No..." he wept as he stroked what bit of silver-hair was left on her charred scalp. "What about *my love*? What about *our love* we were going to share together until the end of time? And *your* promise... Satella?"

From inside his robe, he withdrew a black book. He flipped madly and hastily through the pages, before he stopped on a specific one. His eyes scanned the words etched in blood, and then widened in astonishment. His strength failed him, and the tome fell solemnly to the floor, bouncing but once before resting itself on the cold cavernous floor.

In despair, he curled himself into the lifeless corpse of his lover and resigned himself to whatever fate awaited him. If she were taken from him, then his meaningless life was over.

He closed his eyes.

"Are you well, Subaru?" a voice echoed within his mind.

His eyes opened once more.

Subaru looked to his right and locked eyes with the worried gaze of Satella, whose expression was painted over with worry and angst. She rose her hand to her mouth in distress, unsure of what to say or do.

A second later, she heard an odd sound escape him. It was laughter, she figured, but it was demented and twisted as if done in self-deprecation. It wasn't like any laugh Satella had ever heard before.

"So, it is to be, then," Subaru eked out through his deranged cackle. "My *love* has been repaid once more, and so the gods of this world smile upon me yet again!" Turning to Satella, he took her hand and led her away without explanation, as she offered little resistance.

He stepped up to the chasm basked in shadow below him, and he met eyes with the anxious Satella who stood by him. She stepped over the precipice and looked down at the bottomless pit below.

"What are we doing, Subaru?" she asked. "The exit is back behind us in the opposite direction. Surely, you don't mean for us to go down there, right?" Her voice became more and more unsure as she stared deeper into the never-ending hole.

Turning to her, he met her concerned eyes with a determined stare. "Do you trust me?" he asked shortly, while reaching out his hand once more. "I am guessing you cannot use your power of levitation while you're in your corporeal form, so you're just going to have to trust me instead."

"W-what do you mean?" she nervously asked, her tone itself spurring him.

He knelt next to her. "I will carry you," he offered, holding out his arms for her. "But you must come quickly, we do not have much time."

Satella nodded and then stepped over to him. Gently, she rested herself against the comfort of his grasp, and he stood up with her easily as if she were the weight of a feather. She let out a light gasp in surprise.

Subaru grinned, and he looked down determinedly into the intimidating pit of nothingness. Wordlessly, he strode to the very edge of the cliff. Satella hugged him tightly, clearly afraid he was going to jump.

He answered her fears with his right foot, stepping forward.

She shut her eyes and let out a shriek as she felt the rush of air catch her silver hair, as they plummeted down towards the unknown.

And a moment later the air stilled, and her hair settled just above her shoulders once more in a calm respite. In confusion, she looked up to Subaru, who had a triumphant smile gracing his lips, then she looked around. Her eyes widened at what she saw.

We are floating?! she thought. Her excited thoughts did not betray her. Indeed, they were flying in mid-air, as if Subaru himself commanded the elements of the sacred triumvirate: wind, fire, and earth. Of course, he did not possess this magical prowess, and to her knowledge, only one man in existence had such an ability: Roswaal L. Mathers. So just how, could he levitate as he currently did?

"Well, this is nice," Subaru quipped. "The view is much nicer from down here. In fact, I can almost see the bottom."

Satella narrowed her eyes as she peered down into the shadow. Even though she was afraid of heights, she felt nothing as she looked down there because she couldn't see anything. It's as if they were in another dimension entirely, surrounded by darkness and darkness alone. But, as they hovered further and further down into the pit, she realized he was right.

There *was* something down there, but she couldn't quite tell what it was.

"Just a moment, it's going to get a little bumpy," he whispered into her pointed ear. "I've never landed this thing before, so I don't know how it's going to go. Here, if you reach your arm around my neck..."

He craned his head forward to allow her to use his neck for support. She didn't know what he meant, but she was careful enough to brace for impact anyway.

Below them, the faint color of teal lagmite spread itself across the walls of the chasm, granting them a faint glow so they could finally see the bottom. Subaru then hugged Satella tight against his body to absorb whatever shock they were about to feel, and—

They splashed against the rocky surface of the pit. For the most part, Subaru protected her from the force of the crash, but it was no doubt a jarring sensation to feel. Satella lay splayed across Subaru as he shook his head to banish the dizziness from said landing. He stood up and rubbed his head gingerly, having smacked his head against the rock.

"It would seem I disengaged the spell a bit too soon," said Subaru as he inspected their surroundings carefully.

"The spell?" Satella replied. "What kind of spell was that?"

Subaru smiled softly. "It was an Authority, something you should be very familiar with."

"An Authority...?" Satella's voice was soft as she recollected memories long since forgotten. Suddenly, she pressed her fingers to her temple as a sharp pain assailed her, and then she remembered.

Her pain went unnoticed to Subaru, but still he looked at her with a hint of worry. He was always protective of her like that.

"Geuse..." she whispered sadly, as flashes of long-forgotten memories returned to her.

The memories were sharp, and painful as they stuck into her like a freshly-whetted knife. Two or three lonesome tears rolled down her cheek as she felt feelings forgotten for a century. Over the past month, these memories had been returning to her ever since she left the Sanctuary. But this

time, they were as clear as day to her, and not just the fleeting moments of her dreams. She remembered, and the pain was almost too much to bear.

"Is there something wrong, Satella?" Subaru asked, giving her shoulder a light squeeze. "You don't look so well. Did you have vertigo from the heights? If you need to rest, then we can. I believe we are safe down here."

"No, I'm fine," Satella said gently in return. "In fact, we should be on our way. The quicker we get out of this cavern, the better. And I no doubt believe we are still in danger."

Subaru smiled once more, said nothing, as nothing needed to be said in response. A moment later though, he heard Satella's voice once more, but this time in a very different tone:

"Do you have any idea how we can escape this terrible place?"

He scratched his chin in thought, and then reached his hand into his robe. From within, he withdrew a small, black book, just a little bit larger than his hands. Carefully, he opened it and began to delve into its pages soundlessly.

Satella felt herself shiver at the sight of such a thing. There was something unnerving about the book, but she couldn't place a finger on it. Her amethyst eyes narrowed as she looked closer at it. Subaru was focused completely on the book itself and had not noticed she was staring at it. She felt small beads of sweat trickle down the side of her head as she kept her intense glare. Soon, there was an itch in her stomach, and it travelled all the way up to her skull. She wanted to pull her eyes away from the book, but some otherworldly force prevented her neck muscles from functioning.

Then, she heard it:

"...Witch of Envy, dost thou find mine own pages captivating?"

Satella let out a horrid shriek and fell backwards to the floor. Quickly, she crawled away from Subaru as he looked at her in confusion.

"Satella!" Subaru cried as he rushed over to her, black book in hand. "Why are you frightened? Did you see something in the darkness? Are we in any danger?" He gripped her quivering hand protectively, scanning the shadows for any life, friend, or foe.

Having found none, he turned his worrisome gaze back to the quivering half-elf who lay against the rocky ground. Gently, he took her in his arms, and he brushed her silver-bangs from her amethyst eyes to comfort her. She was shaking against him, almost convulsing even as he held her tightly to keep her still.

"Please, tell me what's wrong," he pleaded to her as he rocked her like an infant. "Please, Satella, something must be wrong..."

Satella's panicked eyes shut, and then reopened with a fear spread across them. "The book..." she whispered faintly, almost too low to hear. "...Get the book away from me. I can feel it crawling inside my head... Its vile words spread its poison over my mind as if it were evil itself..."

Subaru looked at the book in his hand, and then back at Satella. Quickly, he stuffed the book back into the pocket and safe confine of his robe.

Satella instantly felt as if an immeasurable weight had been lifted off her. The words inside her mind had stopped, but the things it already said had already taken its toll on her. In the moments it had connected with her, it had toiled laboriously within every crook and cranny of her spirit.

Subaru had been watching Satella as unobtrusively as he could. When he noticed she had begun to return to normal, he reached out and cupped her cheek with the palm of his hand. She felt unusually hot to the touch, as if she were running a fever.

He waited for her lidded eyes to open once more, before he spoke, stroking the side of her face lovingly, "You feel hot! If you're not well enough to travel, then we should maybe rest. I don't want you getting sick, especially when we're trapped inside this cave like this."

Satella was quick to reply.

"I am fine, Subaru," Satella replied quickly, nuzzling herself into the loving touch of his palm. "Finer, even, because of your touch. The very feeling of your skin relieves even the greatest headache."

Subaru smiled, which Satella returned. "Don't tell me you were faking it just so you could get me to embrace you," Subaru chuckled. "That would be a new low..."

"What do you mean?" Satella grinned at him. "Do you *reeeeally* believe I would do something like that? Please, Subaru... have the decency to use your common sense the Divine Dragon bestowed upon you."

"Nothing surprises me anymore with you," he replied swiftly. "In fact, I tend to expect the unexpected when it comes to silver haired half-elves in this world. The one I came across seems to be most intriguing in all aspects. Hell, you even seem to change the way you talk on a whim. I'm not entirely sure which way is the cutest."

"Intriguing, huh?" Satella pointed while trying to keep a straight face, as she pushed off him and stepped away, hands firmly on her hips.

"I didn't mean that."

"Oh, really?"

Subaru stepped towards Satella.

She gasped as he backed her up against the wall of the chasm, pinning her up against the wall, his arms on either side preventing her from escaping.

"It would seem you can't go anywhere," Subaru said as he drew his face close to hers, close enough for her to feel his breath on her skin. "In that case, what should I do now?"

"Now, this is intriguing..." she breathlessly whispered through playful smile. "*Whatever* are you going to do, I wonder...?"

His left hand snaked around the nape of her neck and squeezed lightly, but threateningly enough to get his point across.

"I think," Subaru teased, "You should be careful about what you say. Next time you try to run from me, I won't let you go so easily."

"You won't have to," Satella said ruefully. "Beneath those menacing eyes of yours, I can see you wish for nothing more than to be by my side. I happen to feel the same way, so there shan't be a next time."

Subaru's silver eyes narrowed at her, and he released his hold on her. "If you say so..." he

whispered.

Satella noticed the playfulness vanish from the song of his voice, and then he walked away from her in the other direction. She followed closely behind him, wondering why he hurt as much as he did.

Neither Subaru nor Satella spoke to each other for quite some time, as they walked close by one another, unsure of where they were going. The faint glow of the lagmite crystals still spread themselves evenly along the cavern walls, symmetrically placed there unnaturally by a sentient being. They lit one of only two potential pathways they could take, and so they followed it without question.

Even though she did not show it, Satella was a stormy sea of emotions. She had yet to come to full terms with her newfound persona, one she was struggling to adapt. And yet, she dared not question Subaru or his desire for her. She was who he said she was, and that was that. She desired his love and his love only, and if he saw her as Satella, that was exactly who she would be.

She knew not why, but ne'er would she challenge it.

It was in his love she found the ultimate peace, and she would do nothing to forsake such a thing. There wasn't anyone else who could convince her otherwise, and the small ring which dangled from the chain around her neck reminded her of such a fact.

There, deep within her heart, she let the feelings of love guide her on every path she took. Even as she walked now, side by side with the love of her life, she felt herself change with every step. There were new feelings to enjoy, new experiences to be had, and new realizations to be made.

And with one foot out in front of the other, she kept her pace.

So, there she continued, walking along the ancient pathways where few tread, locked in the prison of her own thoughts. It was quite some time until a voice freed her from the captivity of her own mind.

"Look at that, Satella," Subaru gasped, as he pointed at a sprawling structure in front of them. "I can honestly say I did not expect to find this down here."

She had been walking behind him now, so she had to peek around his body to see what was in front of them. Her jaw almost dropped in response to what she saw.

There, growing out from a massive wall of rock in front of them, was an ancient temple from a bygone era. It had seven massive, sprawling columns of stone shooting up into the sky where it met the ceiling, signifying its entrance in grand fashion. She couldn't recognize the markings or etchings on the columns, or even the architecture itself. It was something so foreign to her it had to have been thousands of years old, if not more. In fact, she dared to think something like this possibly dated back before the recorded history of Lugnica.

"I've never seen anything like this before," Satella gaped at the ancient and colossal structure. "In fact, I don't think I've even read about something like this before."

"Really?" Subaru replied. "You've been around a long time, apparently, and you've never heard of this? Do you have amnesia or something like that?"

Satella just gawked at the brazenness of his approach. "Well... if you really want to put it that way, then yes. I do have some sort of memory loss, but not in the way you would assume."

"Call it whatever you want," Subaru said, taking his first steps on the stairs leading up to the entrance. "But this is beyond incredible."

"I agree wholeheartedly," Satella said wondrously.

As the two approached the entrance, there was a massive stone door which had no visible method of entry—doorhandle and the like. It was peculiarly crafted, with a multitude of unknown symbols etched across its frame. The enormous stone door would be impossible to move by any human hand, as it no doubt had an immense weight.

"How do we get past this doorway?" Subaru asked as he placed his hand against the door.

Satella stepped up and inspected it closely herself. "I'm not sure. But there appears to be some sort of enchantment cast on this door, as if it is waiting for *someone* or *something* to cast the sister spell to open it."

"That's interesting," Subaru remarked as he rubbed his chin in thought. "So, that means whoever placed the spell on this door was expecting the person to return, right?"

"That would be correct," Satella said evenly.

"I wonder..." Subaru whispered to himself before he turned to Satella. "I want you to stand right here, while I go over there and check something out. Don't come near me; we don't want anything to happen to you. In fact, I want you to close your eyes and plug your ears with your fingers, just to be on the safe side."

It was an odd request, for sure. Satella just nodded and wordlessly watched him walk away from her. He stepped around one of the large columns and out of sight. Begrudgingly, she did what he asked of her, cupping her hands over her ears and shutting her eyes tightly.

Simply put, she felt stupid.

Moments passed, and she was getting quite impatient. She was curious as to what he was up to, and so she made her decision. Very sneakily, she tiptoed over to the large column, and then she carefully peeked around it to see what he was doing.

There, in the darkness, she could vaguely make out his shape as he was perusing the black book from earlier as if he were searching for something within its pages.

In a panic, she ripped her gaze from the living book before it could ensnare her in its grasp yet again. She hugged herself against the column and then stepped away from it back towards the towering door, putting herself at the greatest distance between her and the tome. Stupid or not, she shut her eyes and covered her ears once more.

After a couple minutes, she could hear Subaru's footsteps as he walked up the stone stairs once more.

"It's okay now," he said reassuringly as he approached her. "It's safe now, you can relax yourself, Satella."

Peeking one eye open carefully, she dared to look in his direction. Sure enough, the book was nowhere to be seen, and locked away securely in the deep confines of his robe.

"Did that *thing* tell you anything about this place?" Satella asked him venomously. "In fact, how do you know if we can even trust its words?"

"Oh, we can trust it," Subaru said as he stepped up to the colossus of a door.

Carefully, he touched a specific spot next to the door, and then he began to wipe away the dust and dirt from it. After a moment, something unexpected revealed itself to her. There, next to the doorway, was a meticulous carving of a palm print.

"Bingo," Subaru gestured affirmatively. He then turned to Satella and winked at her. "Don't be shy, come and press your hand to this panel here. I trust you will be interested to see what happens when you do."

There was a silence, then the sound of light footsteps. She approached the panel slowly, and without a word, she pressed her quivering hand against it. It fit perfectly—so perfectly, in fact, she could not even feel the edges of the stone as her hand entered the small fissure.

Satella's breath caught in her throat, and then she gasped. As if resurrected by her touch, the panel gleamed a dim blue light, and then it grew until it was a bright shine.

In response, the door creaked, and shards of stone and dust fell from the cracks of the doorway as the giant thing began to supernaturally open inward. No human power could have opened such a massive block of stone, but it slid open easily as if it were weightless. After a moment, they heard a roaring lurching sound, and the door came to a still as it had opened fully.

The pair peeped their heads around the now-opened entrance. Looking inside, they saw nothing, as there was only darkness. With no light to guide them, they would no doubt have difficulty in finding their way.

Suddenly, Satella outstretched her hand and whispered an incantation. A small flame combusted from the palm of her hand and shot into the temple without warning. It splashed against the ground and sent small flames scattering everywhere, bringing light to the darkness of the ancient structure.

"What in the hell are you doing?!" Subaru shrieked. "We have no idea what's in here! There could be enemies far more terrible than the cultists from before! What if there's a nasty demon beast in here, like the Great Hare?"

Satella let a small laugh escape her lips. "You worry too much," she said teasingly. "If only myself had the ability to access this temple, then do you really think there's anything still alive in here?"

Subaru's mouth fell open. "You..." he started, before catching himself. "Well, I can't really argue with that logic. Come on, let's see what's inside before the flames go out."

He hadn't even finished the sentence before Satella walked calmly into the temple.

She was confident, he could tell, as if she had been here before. He certainly got an interesting vibe from the place. Even with their limited visibility, he could tell it was massive in its expanse. There were numerous statues, seemingly long forgotten, of several people who appeared vaguely familiar, but their wear made it too difficult to discern.

They followed the statues down an ancient hallway until they arrived at a second doorway. Once again, it had a handprint, but this time it was visible, seemingly untouched by the cruel passages of time.

Satella pressed her hand against it once more, and this time it did not shine in response. In fact, it did nothing. She withdrew her hand from the imprint in the wall and looked at it in confusion, as if she had no idea what to do next.

"That's odd," Subaru remarked, looking closer over the panel. "It's the same shape as the one before, and it fits your hand perfectly. So why isn't it opening?"

Satella furrowed her brow. "I don't know," she whispered quietly. "Maybe there is—"

As if beckoned by her voice, the panel shone a blue luminescence again, and then the smaller doorway began to shake. Abruptly, it swung outward, and both Subaru and Satella had to jump out of the way before they were struck by the thing. The doorway smashed against the stone wall and it crumbled to pieces, sending dust and debris into the air.

Subaru coughed as the smoke began to clear itself, so they could finally see inside. Satella smacked the dirt and dust off her silver hair and gathered herself.

This room was not shrouded in darkness like the rest of the temple. There were lights inside of it—very bright ones at that. Lanterns hung from the walls of the ancient olden antechamber. Endless glowing flames glittered in the darkness, brought to life by some sort of magic.

The pair entered and walked silently amongst the halls. With wonderous eyes, the two could barely contain their excitement as they travelled. And so they walked, until they found themselves nearing their destination.

As they set foot in the new room, they were graced with a grand sight.

Three great statues stood in front of them, and in front of it lay an unknown tomb. One of the statues was clearly of a dragon, and it no doubt bore the likeness of the Divine Dragon Himself. One of the other individuals was robed, and another bore a familiar sword known to be in the possession of the one called the Sword Saint. It was clear these statues represented the three great heroes who apparently sealed Satella four hundred years ago.

The tomb was unremarkable, outside of its symbolic importance. It was unadorned with any jewels or craftsmanship—simply a block of stone. There no clues regarding the identity of the tomb's owner, so they could only give it a good guess.

In front of it however, lay a treasure lost for half a millennium.

A sword etched from the shadows themselves stood comfortably against its stand in front of the tomb. It was in a shape of what Subaru would have remembered from his home country, known as a *tachi*. Its *saya* was pitch black in color, and bore no further gaudy embellishments.

It was quite, simply put, an unremarkable thing.

Subaru stepped in front of the weapon stand and stared at the ancient blade. He was hesitant to take it in his grasp, as its power was no doubt immense. He wasn't even sure if he possessed the honor of holding such a vaunted weapon.

Of course, he knew what lay in front of him, simply because the book had told him.

And as Satella stood by, she held her breath as he knelt to take the weapon as his own.

With great respect, he took the sword by the handle and body of the *saya* with two hands, before unsheathing it open naturally, as if it were by his side since the day he was born.

Vestiges of shadow spilled from the scabbard, the color of obsidian, as the malformed blade came into full view.

It wasn't even a blade, *no*—it fit its namesake quite well. The shadows themselves were literally clinging to the blade as if it commanded all the darkness of the world. Suddenly, the gloomy haze began to form something tangible, and the curved sword took a shape more familiar, even if the blade itself was as black as tar.

And in the palm of his hand, Subaru held high one of the mightiest weapons in all the world.

It was one of the legendary *Ten Swords of Power*:

"The Sword of Shadow..."

A Portrait of Hell

"Oh, Subaru," Satella whispered, listless enervation infusing her voice. "I wish we could have taken the short route out of here. I would prefer to be out of this damp, humid cave, and smelling the cold, crisp air of the forest presently."

If only it was that easy, Subaru thought ruefully, as he glanced at the steep and imposing cavern walls which descended from the shadows above. His eyes closed, letting a knowing smile grace his formerly expressionless features.

The half-elf turned to look at her partner, her head tilted curiously in wonder.

"It shouldn't be too much longer," Subaru stated matter-of-factly. "If we had any other choice in the matter, I wouldn't have led us down here in the first place. Besides, the spoils of such an adventure may prove to be worthwhile yet."

Satella giggled. "If you say so," she said behind a delicate smile.

Subaru's teeth flashed briefly in the darkness. "The quality time we are sharing together justifies this journey in any case."

Satella happened to agree, and she bowed her head. Then, a moment later, she relaxed into quiet contentment as she walked alongside her partner. The two had a profound connection, even if their current state forged a bond a *tad* bit more complicated than before. Satella felt at ease, and it certainly wasn't because of their current predicament. This comfort solely sourced from this one who accompanied her. *'Everything would be fine,'* she reminded herself, forasmuch as her companion ne'er strayed from her hand.

She was, however, perturbed by how dependent Subaru was on the eldritch book sleeping soundly within the thin prison of his pocket.

"That seems to be quite the ponderous tome in your possession," Satella noted, as the light mood slipped away. "I've noticed you've been studying its pages quite intently as of late. I wonder what it is you find so interesting? 'Tis such a small thing... shouldn't you be at an end?"

Subaru looked at her in the corner of his eye. "Uh, well, you see... it has quite small lettering," he said, his tone making it obvious for Satella to tell he was lying.

"Small lettering?" she repeated, raising her eyebrow skeptically. "I surely hope you don't think I would believe such nonsense. I shan't, and to be fairly honest, I'm more than worried about that *thing*."

"There's nothing to worry about," Subaru replied quickly. "And I think you should mind your own business... and keep such unfounded worries to yourself." His eyes were straight-ahead as he uttered this, and steely.

It was callously said, and Satella felt lightheaded, his leaden words weighing down upon her mercilessly. They had been walking, hands adjoined, for what seemed like an eternity, but now, only one pair of footsteps could be heard as the weight in his hand disappeared. Her still gaze was fixed on the craggy ground, away from Subaru and the rest of the world. The uneven floor felt cold and distant, as were Subaru's words, and at once, she felt very alone just as if she were in Elior Forest all those years ago.

"I didn't believe you would ever speak such heartless words to me," Satella whispered harshly. "If you truly feel such a way, then please, let it be known."

Subaru, turning to face her, gasped. "Satella, I didn't mean that," he said breathlessly. "I don't know what came over me... I just lost control a little bit, that's all."

Satella chose to ignore his apology. She shook her head despondently. "That's an excuse most tiresome, Subaru. Such biting words are more devastating than the mighty jaws of a Wolgarm."

"Satella, you must understand," Subaru said, stepping toward her. "Those words, while spoken from my mouth, *may not* have been my own."

"Whose words were they then?" Satella asked sharply. "Was it the maddening sounds of that *thing* you hold so dear? Then, should I begin to wonder whom I am speaking to each time your voice escapes you? Why would I possibly tolerate—"

"Don't speak of it anymore!" Subaru angrily said. Satella fell immediately into silence. Feeling his anger boil inside him until it came to a head, Subaru clenched his fists and turned away from her. His mind was a torrent of chaos, assailed by a voice unheard.

There was a silence about the room, until it was broken by the distressing sounds of a small whimper. With her head bowed, gentle streams of tears cascaded down Satella's cheeks. Her shoulders quivered as she bleated irregularly, and she wrapped her arms around her sides in a vain attempt to comfort herself.

Upon hearing her disconsolate state, Subaru returned his sight to Satella as she wept. Shame stretched across his face, and the ignominy of hurting the one closest to him stirred a debilitating sickness within his stomach. Thus, Subaru's voice was gentler when he spoke. "Satella, I'm so sorry for everything. I was too insensitive—uncaring, even. I just want you to know, I would never intentionally say something to hurt you!"

"Why did you then?!" Satella forced out amid a sob.

Subaru looked down at her as she met eyes with him. Her pained, tear-laden amethyst orbs under a furrowed brow looked up at him in turmoil. His knees felt weak, and it took every fiber of his being to prevent himself from buckling under the pressure of her stare.

"I have no excuse," he admitted somberly, his eyes locked with her own. "I just ask that you forgive me, and honor me with your love once more. *Your* love is all I desire in this world, Satella."

The ravenous shadows, eager to consume all light, had grown around them as the crystals dimmed. To outsiders, it'd appear as if the pair were locked away in their own world—a new dimension even, separate from all other trifles of the world. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* For a moment, the only audible sounds were of light, plopping sounds as water trickled endlessly from the stalactites unseen in the darkness. Then, a deep breath, as famished lungs filled with air.

"You desire *my* love," Satella breathed out. "Yet, 'tis something which is already within your grasp, is it not? Haven't I given myself to you in every way: body, mind, and soul? My dearest beloved, I *am* yours, in the most literal sense."

On the most rational level, Subaru could not comprehend this. No doubt it was clear Satella did love him as desired, but still, a nervousness harbored within him. It was as she said; she had given herself to him in every respect, and yet, she felt distant—aloof, even. Something separated them, like a thin translucent pane of glass, ever close yet unbreakable, containing a great distance in its

invisibly minute form and yet he could still torturously see her all the while.

Nor was this fear abated as he looked down at the stricken features painting her beautiful face. Even in sorrow, she was the most angelic thing he had ever laid eyes on. Captivated by her spell, he hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath ever since they met eyes.

"Satella..." Subaru whispered, his voice short-winded.

"You are more precious to me than you could ever know," Satella said, her voice wavering. "I only ask for you to trust me, and to allow myself to step into your world. To accept my concern with confidence, knowing I worry only because of my love for you. You have showed me what it means; to love one another as I love you... and I *mustn't* let it escape my grasp."

Still, Subaru found himself unable to speak, almost choking when he stopped breathing once more. Finally, feeling himself going faint, he imperatively sucked in a few vital puffs of air, but it felt like tongues of flame instead. She had made such a powerful confession, it rendered something effortless as breathing a difficult task.

For a long moment, no one moved, and there was silence. Finally, Subaru, as if compelled by something, reached out and embraced Satella. It wasn't an embrace out of lust, or impulse, or any other base instinct resembling that of carnal desire. He embraced her simply out of the love beating as furiously as a drum within him.

"I would burn the world, just for you," he whispered earnestly into her pointy ear.

Every syllable tickled her, yet she did not feel it as the declaration held every thought of her mind captive. And yet, even though it could have been just an exaggeration, she knew he meant each word spoken. He would have done *anything* to be by her side, she could see that now. Even if she knew not what she was saying, she could feel her lips begin to move.

"I don't wish for the world to burn," said Satella. "I wish only for you to *give* it to me. And in that world, there will only be you and me, by ourselves, and with nobody else to bother us. *That...* is my dream. *That...* is my undying wish."

In a low voice, Subaru said, "Then it shall be done. With you and me together, let us make your wish a reality. The world will be ours; I promise you this. And one day, when all the battles and suffering have finally passed into memory, only you and I will remain."

Satella paused for a moment as her furrowed brow relaxed, and the gentle sheen blanketing her amethyst eyes returned. Carefully, she reached two steady hands—in almost a dreamlike slowness—to claim him. She drew closer what she had gripped, and found herself peering at their adjoined hands, melded together as if they were connected at the flesh.

"And we shall be as one?" she asked with a timid smile. She gave his hands a squeeze, but did not move any further. "And as one, my dream will *finally* come to pass."

Subaru could almost taste the longing in her words. Yet, he watched helplessly as she broke her grasp and walked past him; then, without a word, she turned her head to look at him amidst a pale light, his back turned to her. Even though she couldn't see it, she could feel the meaningful smile which graced his lips.

"We shall be as one," she heard him repeat. "The world will be yours, and we *shall* be as one."

Satella did not reply. Only, after a moment, did she accidentally let loose a solitary tear which rolled solemnly down her right cheek. This time, however, it was a tear filled with joy, and even

neglected as it plummeted to the cold floor of the cavern—long would it be until such feelings were forgotten.

He turned, and silence fell about the two as they yearnfully gazed at each other. Satella hesitated a moment longer; then, aware of his tacit plea to hear her voice once more, she walked up to him and reached her arms around his waist in an embrace. Gently, she nuzzled her cheek against his chest to hear the beating of his heart.

"Close your eyes," he heard Satella say. Even though she was against him, her voice sounded oddly distant, as if she had cast some spell on him to alter his senses. "Mana of Water... please, grant thy healing upon this suppliant soul," she whispered, as a low blue hue emanated from the palms of her hands. "Your heartbeat—it's so fast. Its eager sound, and its even pace excites me so, like the beating of a ceremonial, festive drum." She tightened her hold on him as she released a deep breath against his slim frame.

Subaru knew this feeling. It was her magic, the familiar warmth of it spreading across him, and with it, all the dull pains and soreness of his body began to fade. Soon, the pounding thump against his chest steadied, and his breathing slowed.

Lulled by her tender spell, he found himself relaxing into a dreamlike state. His eyes lidded once, twice, blinking open furiously to banish the impending sleep... then they closed.

He was floating through a turquoise blue sky, wind keen on his face. The crispness of the pine forest below him was heady, and yet, with such a uniqueness to it all, he knew not where he was. Mindlessly, he drifted downward, until he was amongst the immutable trees themselves. There, he hovered, passing through gentle streams and long-forgotten woodlands, until he found himself at an egress.

Flowing through the last remnants of greenery, he was now encircled by an arid and formless desert. In front of him, there soared a sprawling tower in the distance which reached into the heavens itself, and yet as he travelled along the dunes, never did he come closer to it—nor did the distance between them grow.

His eyes narrowed. Just over the horizon, a strange bright light blossomed, until he was swathed in it. He shielded himself as it blinded him.

And long after the world turned white, it finally faded.

Lowering his hands slowly from his face, Subaru's eyes widened. He found himself standing before a destitute, ancient shrine made of stone. Battered and beaten by sandstorms and other elements of the desert for half a millennium, whatever grand importance it might have once had was long since lost. Its entrance lay buried under a mountain of mutable sand, and it seemed to be nothing more than a crumpled ruin—an unwilling victim of the cruel passages of time. If such a place existed in the waking world, none breathing would've ever tread this forgone land.

Gently, he touched a steady palm to the crumbling stone, and as if beckoned, he heard a faraway, yet intimate bell chime within him:

"We shall be one, and as one, my dream will finally come to pass..."

And as the bell tolled repeatedly, he found himself lured back into the deep recesses of his mind.

Subaru's eyes flickered open once more.

Two wide, unblinking amethyst orbs gazed down at him. Her brow was furrowed and distressed,

and as soon as she saw his own visage breathe life anew, her long dark lashes fluttered worryingly.

"Subaru, are feeling well?" Satella whispered on bated breath. She brushed the bangs from his eyes and stroked the side of his face lovingly, as she continued, "You fell limp in my arms under the palm of my healing magic. It's a possibility you are susceptible to water mana..."

"Ah, there's no need for worry," Subaru said, sitting up from her lap. "Whenever someone's mana sloshes around in my body like that, it makes me feel dizzy. Maybe I just fell unconscious this time?"

"I see," said Satella a moment later, as her hands travelled to his forehead. "You feel hot, and that's unusual given the decreasing temperature of this cave. Are you sure you're well enough to travel?"

Subaru was silent, all his thoughts distracted by the soft touch of her palm against his skin. With gentility, she traced along his cheek and jaw from his temples, until it rested still against his neck, where she continued to feel his body heat. Unlike her counterpart, she brooded silently, her thoughts plagued with both concern and anxiety.

"There shouldn't be any issue," he said briefly. "However, if it keeps you touching me like this, perhaps I feel sick, after all."

Satella's cheeks puffed out and she let out an angry huff of air. "Subaru, this is no time to jest," she chided impatiently. "In case you didn't already notice, when I touched you before, I felt small tears within your gate—which is why I began to heal you as I did. Have you been using magic lately?"

Subaru swallowed. *She had felt such damage within him so easily?* he asked himself. "You could sense such a thing just by touching me?" he then said, astonishment laden in his voice. "Well, if you must know, I had used some manner of magic earlier, before you returned to me. It was brief, but it was the first time I used such a form of power..."

Satella's eyes narrowed. "Was it your Authority?" she asked curiously.

Uncannily to the point—impressive, even—but he could tell she was grasping at straws even if she hit her mark. He stood and smiled at her. "It was an Authority, and yet that is not what affected my gate. Recently, there has been an outpouring of dark mana through my gate—what normal people call '*Witch's Scent*'. Perhaps my gate was not used to harnessing so much of it at once, and that's what damaged it. It coincides with our meeting last night, so it's all I can come up with."

Satella was silent a moment as she pressed her forefinger to her mouth in thought. Then, her eyes opened wide, revealing an epiphany. "Our reunion coincides with the growing power..." she started, before snapping her fingers together triumphantly. "Are you suggesting our proximity to one another determines your ability to channel this reservoir of '*Witch's Scent*' within you?"

"Precisely!" he approved.

"But what if we are separated? Would there be any consequences?"

Subaru thought a moment, and then said, "I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing that would be the case. As you stand next to me right now, I can feel the darkened mana swell inside me, charmed by your presence. It's distracting, almost; its potency threatening to overwhelm every other sensation of my body."

Satella stepped in front of him, hands firmly on her hips. "You speak of it like you speak of our love," she said with asperity, while trying to keep a straight face. "So, which is it? Are you interested in me for my love, or just the power you have gained from me?"

"That's not what I meant at all," Subaru hurriedly said, raising his hands in defense, before an adoring smile graced his lips. "If anything, the love you have honored me with has empowered me to do things beyond my capability. Your *love* strengthens my will... hardens my resolve... and gives me the focus to do what must be done. There isn't a second in a day which goes by when I don't think of your love, Satella."

Her agitated demeanor relaxed as she swooned from his words. "Oh, Subaru, you are *sooo* romantic," Satella said, amorous adulation imbuing every syllable. "When you speak such words to my ears... I feel like I'm going to faint. *Please*, catch me..." She closed her eyes, and with a faint sigh, she playfully fell toward him.

And as she fell, Subaru, not one to let his most cherished lover fall unceremoniously to the hardened floor, caught her. Falling into his embrace, she let another sigh escape her lips—this time full and heavy—as she released the burden of all her stresses into the air. Subaru's hand snaked around her and burrowed itself into the thick tufts of her silver hair, and he craned her head gently, so they were facing each other. A colorless, yet vivacious gaze looked down upon devoted lavender eyes under long dark lashes.

"I haven't known you to act so fun like that before," Subaru whispered as he closed the gap between them. "Not that I'm complaining or anything like that. In fact, I really do enjoy this playful side of you."

Satella felt goosebumps spread across her skin as his hot breath splashed against her face. She tried to think of a response, something witty or enticing, yet no words came to her. He had enthralled her with his words, and the butterflies within her stomach proved this to be so. She could feel her body temperature rising, the bloodied flush of her cheeks spreading across her alabaster skin unrestrained. Her fingertips felt sticky, and her mouth dry as unspoken words came to her and went like the passing winds of Elio. She closed her eyes... then, she heard a distorted whisper:

"...Witch of Envy, why dost thou hide thine own heart behind such unfathomable truths?"

His lips were coming closer. She abruptly turned her head to the side, enough to where his kiss contacted her cheek instead of her quivering and wanting lips. As quickly as it came, his lips departed her skin, which had become noticeably cool to the touch.

Subaru had observed the physical changes of her body, and so carefully, he let her down. His keen eyes above a concerning frown were prodding her for an explanation, but she gave him none.

"I thought you wanted a kiss," he said. "But you know... I can tell a lot about you just by careful observation. You seem to be uneasy, so what's gotten you so anxious?"

She did not lie to him. "The book inside your robe... It spoke to me once more."

There was a faint hint of amusement in his voice. "Oh, and what did it tell you?" He turned to her and gazed at her the same as he always did, yet there was something unnerving in his eyes.

"It shared *nothing* worth repeating in words," Satella replied with a bite in her tone. "It speaks in incomprehensible riddles and trick speech, so one may never hope to understand its meaning."

Subaru stood in silence for a moment, before Satella saw him reach into the crevice of his robe. Her eyes narrowed as he gazed expressionlessly back at her.

"That's interesting," he said absently. "Because... I can certainly comprehend its wisdom. If you ask it the right questions, you might find it has... much *insight* to offer." Inside his robe, his

fingertips brushed lovingly over the leather spine of the book as he uttered this.

She did not reply for a long time, afraid to speak back. Subaru, who might as well have been staring into darkness, just stood wordlessly as he toyed with the book inside the confines of his robe. After some time, his hand left the barrier of his robe and returned to his side once more.

Glancing over to her out of the corner of his eye, he said, "There isn't much else to say other than I simply need your trust. I'm not sure how many times we're going to go over this, but there's nothing to fear from the book. If it were any threat to you or myself, I would have thrown it away or destroyed it by now, believe me."

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. She didn't know what to say. Having pled with him many times over already, nothing she said was effective.

But then, she saw Subaru was smiling. It was a frightening smile, and that strangeness in his eye from before had returned as he looked at her. He called, "Come, Satella. We should really be getting on our way. I think you and I are both tired from being in this cave, and it's time for us to depart."

Satella let out a small sigh in resignation. "Yes, I think you're right," she whispered. Hearing his voice, she felt genuinely uneasy. There was a peculiarity to him now which she could not comprehend. It was probably that book again, but she could never know for sure.

He reached an outstretched hand to her. She looked down, viewing her own hands as they lay helplessly by her side. Returning her gaze to her partner's grey eyes, she slowly reached up and took his left with her right. Their hands clasped together as one, and she retook her place by his side once more. Subaru smiled a seemingly sincere smile, and then the two made their way in the only direction left to them.

As the two walked along the darkened corridor, there was a strong silence between them. It wasn't their usual peaceful quietude they were well known for. This stillness was one which felt uncomfortable—awkward, even—as if they had just met each other the day before. Such lack of familiarity was extremely distressing to Satella, even if Subaru had seemingly paid no heed to it at all.

And the faint words of evil which reverberated in her mind did nothing to quell such distresses.

Listening to the gospel's dulcet call over and over in her head as they trudged through the shadows, Satella felt her sanity slipping. The images it presented her: of death, destruction, and what appeared to be the end times—disturbed her beyond the uncertainty of the great unknowns.

In its vision, she saw the sprawling Lugnic capital, reduced to nothing but a wasteland of rubble and ruin. Torn dragon banners the color of blood billowed in the wind; charred corpses dotted the avenues formerly teeming with life; amidst the devastation, an unmistakable blade adorned with a dragon's wings jutted out from the debris—its owner long since perished. A blur of scenery, and she saw Elixir Forest—her home, alight in a torrent of flame; the Tree of Prayers lying stricken against the scorched ground, felled by forces unknown; an enormous wooden door which stood tall by means of magic, lay open, its inscrutable contents exposed. At the very edges of the world, The Great Waterfall's everlasting waters, which had flowed endlessly since time immemorial, stood still as if it never had been there at all. A moon the color of blood hung terrifyingly over the dead kingdom in the sky, its size immeasurable as if it had consumed the light itself in order to grow to such scale. And at the end of it all, only shadows stretched across the land.

She searched within her heart and she knew, with enormous grief, this very well could be the future

if they stayed their path. Yet even so, and most terribly of all, she knew there was naught to be done to change it. If the book did speak the accurate, immutable future, it was a horror-stricken one, petrifying and appalling to behold.

All her life, especially on those nights where she slept alone through her younger years, she had dreamt of peace. No such visions of horror plagued her as these did, even as her long-forgotten memories returned to her without a moment's warning. They, too, paled in comparison to such incomprehensible horrors, even if they threatened to bring tears to her eyes from just simple recollection.

At some point, she found herself numbed to the world, and she walked aimlessly next to her lover—the only reason for her existence in this world. She feared the living pages of the gospel within his possession, and yet, she could not find the power within herself to challenge him in any meaningful way. She couldn't risk losing him, and if such a thing came to pass, she would have preferred to pass into the next world, instead of bearing the pain and suffering of a loss unbearable.

In her mind, she wept quietly, though on the outside she betrayed no emotion other than a furrowed brow and a frown. She wept silently, because in her womanly heart, she wished for nothing more than a peaceful happiness with the one whom she loved. Yet, assailed by forces ambivalent, she found herself spiraling toward an ending uncertain, save for the agony and torment they might endure together.

That was a terrible thought, indeed. Eventually, as she mulled over it for an unknown amount of time, she worked her way back into the world of the present. A protective arm outstretched itself across her chest, stopping her in her tracks.

"There's something in the shadows," Subaru warned.

Having just returning from her delirium, she scarcely understood his words. With weary eyes did she peer into the darkness. She saw nothing. "I can't see anything, Subaru," she whispered quietly to him. "Are you sure there is something hiding amidst the dark?"

Wordlessly, he reached with his right hand to his left side, around where one's sword might lay in a scabbard—yet there was nothing there. Before Satella assumed he'd realize that fact in embarrassment, the shadows surrounding them coalesced into the palm of his hand, before settling down in sword form, darker than the night itself.

Holding the sheathed blade in his left hand, he squinted at the darkness. "You better show yourself," he threatened the nothingness. "Only a rat hides itself amongst the darkness."

Beckoned by his words, an enshrouded figure stepped out from the pitch-black of the cavern. With careful steps did the cultist make its way to them, until it found itself amidst the light of the dwindling lagmite crystals.

Subaru recognized this *new* cultist. It presented an odd presence, and it only confirmed his fears that they were being followed. This one had led the unfortunate duo who captured him and brought him to this place. It was the leader of this sect, no doubt, and just like he murdered the other two, he would make sure this one felt the wrath of his new power as well.

Barring introductions, the genderless foe reached up slowly, forcing Subaru to place his fingers on his blade's handle, gripping the *saya* furiously—ready to draw forth its power at a moment's notice. And yet, the figure did nothing more than reach for their hood and remove it unceremoniously.

As the hood fell solemnly to the floor, long, transparent platinum hair flowed just below her waist.

A beautiful face was unveiled, and on that visage was the playful smile of one who toyed with life itself. Upon revealing herself, she brought before her both of her palms together, her wide smile growing even further, eager to reveal some great secret to them. Noticing the dumbfounded faces of her two guests, she decided she would speak first.

"You two look surprised," she said without hesitation. "My apologies, I would have revealed myself earlier, but for the life of me, I just couldn't bring myself to interrupt you two. I am so relieved you both are getting along so well."

Satella narrowed her eyes in wide shock. "Why—"

"Why am I here?" she interrupted her, and if it were possible, her smile grew wider. "Such a question is one you asked me a hundred years ago. Unlike before, I believe you already know the answer to this question, if you search deep enough." As if disturbed by her own words, the girl silently admonished herself and bowed her head in respect. "My Lady, please forgive me—I was impolite just then, as I had a momentary lapse in judgement. I forgot just *who* I was speaking to, so please, acquiesce this one trespass and allow my deepest apologies."

In speaking her regrets, the beautiful girl was careful to avoid the eye of the wordless Satella, paying no attention to Subaru as he lay in wait. Keen to his darkened presence, she raised her head and saw him out the corner of her eye, as he stood there, silently seething, and ready to strike.

Turning her emotionless gaze to Subaru, she smiled once more and gestured to him. "Your transformation has been most impressive," she praised, with a real sense of sincerity laden in her voice. "You are coming along quite nicely, and for that, I can only be so proud. It warms my old heart to see *such* progress in an individual."

Her voice chilled him, and with a prickling of hairs on his neck and a shiver all but controllable, Subaru gritted his teeth and might as well have snarled at their newfound intruder. "Keep your poisonous words to yourself," he spat with a venom unseen. "If you have anything meaningful to say, save it for when you're drawing the last of your breaths."

The platinum-haired girl smiled wide. "Such hostilities are unbecoming of a freshly inducted Archbishop," she taunted him. "You have undertaken the covenant, have you not? If that is the case, allow me to grant you the warmest of welcomes into our dark society."

"Archbishop?" queried Subaru very softly. For a moment, there was silence anew, and then a deep breath. "I don't know who you are, or who you think I am, but you won't find myself bound to your pitiful little cult of losers. If you orchestrated this wretched event, then you have my thanks, but that's the extent of it. Sorry to disappoint you, but I'll take what's mine and move on."

The girl was silent but smiling all the while—an unnerving one, like it was an aching poison all its own. Just the mere sight of it made beads of sweat trickle down the side of his head. He wanted nothing more than to cut her down without mercy, right here and now—just to be done with it.

She finally broke her silence. "Oh, come now, that's no way to talk," she complained. "Your words are unsightly considering your vaunted lineage, and for that, I must accost you in the politest way. I implore you to pay attention to your words from now on; they *might* just have an impact on future events."

Subaru shook his head. "I really don't care about any of that. I'm taking Satella, and we're going to be on our way."

"Oh, is that so?" she whispered wondrously. "I am so happy you two have finally found your

peace. I trust you two will find your way, as all has been foretold already. Please, don't let me bother you." A smile both wicked and evil graced her lips, the first sincere emotion on her visage to reveal itself.

Subaru let a wild smile of his own paint his features. "You're too polite," he said.

A hissing sound; a thin blade whizzing through the air, its shrill call the only warning of its impending strike. Then, light filled the cavern as the shadows themselves were sucked into a whirlpool extending from the edge of the sword. From shoulder to hip, the ephemeral shadows passed through her body so quickly it could have been said it never happened at all. The girl's perfect flesh, the color of ivory and without blemish, split at almost a cellular level as she disintegrated, until nothing was left.

With a twirl of his weapon, he sheathed his blade and rest it at his side. The shadows he borrowed from their surroundings to conjure such a strike returned to their former state, and they found themselves basked in darkness once more.

Breathing deeply the damp air of the cavern, Subaru relaxed his shoulders and closed his eyes. He then turned to Satella, who appeared to be quivering out of fear. Her frightened expression captured his immediate attention.

"Su-Subaru..." she stuttered, trepidation pervading his own name. "Pandora... She..." Whatever she wished to share with him never came, as a figure in the darkness banished the sounds of her voice.

A wide smile, and a casual flick of long platinum hair. "That wasn't very polite," she had said. "Didn't your mother teach you basic etiquette when receiving a guest?" It was the voice of someone who was clearly very much alive.

In that chimerical scene, with everything dyed pure black, the beautiful girl stood, now wearing nothing but a single piece of cloth. Gone was her cultist robe, and she displayed her otherworldly beauty in the simplest way possible; unabashed and undeterred from her near nudity.

Slowly, Subaru lowered his weapon to his left side, and he eyed her carefully. "What trickery is this?" he said, low and cold. "I saw your body vanish, taken to hell by the shadows themselves—and yet, you stand there as if nothing had happened."

If it were even possible, Pandora smiled wider. "Confused? It's expected, but not unwelcome. I hope, in time, you will see the futility in using any manner of attack against myself. Even though my own feeble strength is lacking, therein is not where my power lies. I had prayed you would relax your temper and allow us a cordial conversation, but perhaps my prayers went unanswered."

"Cordial?" Subaru said calmly. "Was it *cordial* to conceal oneself in the shadows, before snatching someone away without warning? Your underlings cast a spell upon me so diabolical, I wished for nothing but death as it took hold of me. I was locked away in darkness and left without so much as a word of explanation or as to why, and I found myself on the edge of insanity. If not for the company of my dearest, I would have cast myself off the cliff before you returned—yet you ask for peace...?!"

There was something terrible in Pandora's face. "It was by careful design," she said then in an unnaturally disconnected voice. "As the Witch of Vanity, I hold the esteemed duty to search out those with the rare honor to bear a Witch Factor. In this case, you hold *two*: the first one being Sloth, received upon the death of the previous Archbishop who held it. The second one is more curious, and as the sole recipient of this gift, I hereby confer upon thee the coveted seat of Envy,

one which has never before been established."

Subaru eyed her expressionlessly. Understanding next to nothing, unnerved by her sheer reverence of such a bestowal, Subaru found himself wondering just why he had been destined to go down such a path as this. It could be said it were his destiny, one written by forces unknown and enacted by those around him, and yet, he wished only to control his own fate. Truthfully, he wanted power, welcomed it with open arms even, but at what cost? Was he now sacrificing his humanity? How far could he go down this path, just to ascertain his future with the *one* whom he desired love and love alone?

In an instant, he made his decision.

"I accept your seat," he gasped out, almost unknowingly before continuing. "I will play your games for now, but mark my words... you *will* not control me. I will go my own way, and find my own destiny, whether that end be a paradise or a death at the edges of a blade..." His shoulders hunched as if he were in great pain. His knees quivered, pressed under a great amount of weight, yet his voice was still as steel. "...And if any of you get in my way, I will cut you down without mercy. If anyone else challenges me, I will make them wish they had never found the nerve to step in front of me."

Pandora just smiled at him, pleased with his words. She could feel his emotions, his *anger* as he quietly seethed in front of her. It was visible in his rigid, twisting stance; the grit of his teeth; the uneven rise and fall of his chest as he breathed irregularly; the clenching of his fists as they stayed his side.

Without speaking, Pandora pressed the palms of her hands together once more. "I would never ask for anything else," she said serenely. "I entrust you with the most revered duty of safeguarding Lady Satella. This obligation, I am no doubt sure you will undertake without question and execute to the best of your ability." As she said this, she nodded respectfully to Satella, who otherwise betrayed no emotion. "Whilst her retainer, and as the one whom has been blessed with her love, you will enact this sacred duty."

"Yeah, whatever you say," Subaru said curtly. "Just stay out of my way."

"Love. Such a marvelous thing..." Pandora murmured with an expression of undulated ecstasy. "I sincerely wish you two all the best in your travels." Suddenly, she appeared to be getting shorter, before it became apparent she was morphing into the shadows below her feet.

Subaru gestured to her with an outstretched hand. "Wait, before you go... I have questions."

Pandora smiled in the darkness. "The answers to your questions will no doubt come in time. For now, find your path by way of the *Oracle*."

"The Oracle? You mean the gospel?"

She did not respond to that question. She just nodded her head respectfully and said, "Lady Satella... Archbishop Natsuki Subaru... I bid thee a warm farewell."

"*Pandora—!*" he cried, but it was too late.

A few moments later, the beautiful girl had completely vanished from sight, leaving the two lovers alone in the cavern once more. Subaru, undeterred from what had happened, stepped over to Satella and wrapped his arms possessively around her. He could tell she was shaken from what had just occurred, though he knew not why.

"You two have some history, don't you?" he murmured into her pointy ear. "I'm not going to pry or anything, but I do wonder just how far back you two go."

"We have indeed met before," Satella whispered softly. "It was a short encounter, and I scantily remember the details with any level of vividness." She let out a small moan as she could feel his lips brush over her.

"I see," Subaru whispered as he gently kissed her ear. "Let's forget about that and move on. We should be close to the exit of the cave now. We've been travelling upwards for hours, and I suspect this route will lead out to the side of the mountain."

Satella, blushing furiously from the close contact, said, "I'm ready to make our leave. But why do you always have to make me feel like this?" Her stutter was a symptom of his playful foreplay upon her. He was growing bolder in his advances by the hour, she felt.

Subaru looked at her with sultry eyes under a relaxed brow. "I just enjoy being close to you like this. As of late, I feel our connection to one another has grown to such a point there's little I can do to prevent myself from touching you." He gave her one small peck on the cheek before departing from her.

"I understand..." she said breathlessly. "...and I don't mind it, but there's a time and place for everything, Subaru." Noticing her unkemptness, she fixed her disheveled hair and let out a small sigh.

The amusement of Subaru's advances fell to the wayside, and she suddenly found herself left alone in the darkness. Gazing into the distance, she saw he was walking away from her to a direction unknown. Letting out a small gasp, she started off in a light jog to catch up to him, before she noticed something peculiar glimmering amongst the gloom.

She narrowed her inquisitive eyes at the small, verdant green shine jutting out from the walls of the chasm. It had a peculiar illuminance to it, different from all the rest of the cave she had seen thus far. It was surrounded by numerous, larger crystals, entrapping it in what appeared to be a circle. Unlike the other crystals, this one was embedded in rock. Reaching down to brush her fingers over the contours of its diamond-like shape, she suddenly realized its core had a striking resemblance to her previously owned Pyroxene mana crystal.

Her amethyst eyes widened. Touching the tips of her fingers to it, she hastily whispered an incantation. The icy mana began to pool from her fingertips into the bottom of the crystal itself, freezing it at the base. She kept pouring her mana into it, until it cracked at the bottom where it met the rock and shattered into small fragments.

The pure portion, now freed from its earthly grasp, met the palm of her hand before it was pocketed into the confines of her robe. She smiled to herself... and then, hearing soft footsteps approach her, she abruptly turned around.

"Satella?" Subaru said.

His gaze was steady on Satella's face. He had noticed she had strayed from his side, so he came to check on her, before finding her crouched amongst the crystals. She gave him a shy smile, and then poked him in the chest.

"I was just getting one last look at the crystals," Satella said teasingly. "I know we may not ever return here, so I decided to myself: I should enjoy their beauty while I can!" She gave him another one of her best cute smiles, which undoubtedly put him at ease.

A moment later, Subaru began to laugh. It was a genuine, infectious laugh. Her expression softened as she saw the peaceful features of his face contort happily.

"You're so silly, you know that?" Subaru eked out through his chortling. "If you really want a lasting memory of this damnable place, you should take one of them with you."

Satella, seeing the joyous features on his face, threw herself upon him and snaked her arm around his own, pressing her face against his shoulder lovingly. He reciprocated the romantic motion with a light kiss of his own upon her forehead.

"There's no need," she said again, after a moment of silence. "I've spent enough time here... so let's take our leave."

"If you say so," Subaru replied through a gentle smile. He began walking, forcing her to fall in stride with him.

As they walked along the dwindling expanse of the corridor, Subaru could hear a gentle hum emanating from the lips of his partner. The gentle tune of it relaxed him so, and his contentment grew every second. Satella, noticing the softening complexion of his face, hummed further, loving each and every moment she made him feel at peace. There, they accompanied one another, together in a comfortable embrace which spoke louder than any audible word.

Later yet, when the telling lagmite crystals which graced the walls began to dwindle, and the natural light pouring in from moon filled the cavern, they found themselves upon their destination.

And as Subaru, born anew, took his first steps outside the cavern, the glowing moon above threatened to blind him with its powerful glow. As his eyes adjusted to the well-lit night sky, he took a breath deeper than he ever had before. It cleared his headache and heightened his perceptions as new sensations returned to him. He deeply breathed in the crispness of the pines, the smell of the mountainous air... and the smell of cooking?

A haunting thread of sound, just audible over the slopes of the mountain, wrested Subaru's attention away from the new world's scents. Pulling Satella along with him, he crouched and sauntered over to the precipice overlooking a wide-open area. Well-scorched, and riddled with enshrouded bodies alike, its appearance told of the legendary tales of battle and strife.

In any case, they had no time to linger in one place like this.

"What's the best way to get out of here?" Subaru said, as he peered over the mountainside cliff. "I'm not sure what happened here, but I don't want us getting caught just as soon as we broke free of this place."

Satella nodded, and then pointed downward. "If we make our way to where the clearing is, there is a pathway we can take back into the forest where we should be safe under the cover of night." Subaru could tell she had travelled these pathways before, so he would let her do the leading.

"That sounds like a plan!" Subaru snapped, and he readied himself to vault over the edge of the cliff.

There was little option, really. Other than traversing down the jagged, vertical cliffs of the mountain, the pathway in front of them was the only real option. Subaru balanced himself and held Satella's hand firm as they made their way down the cliff, and soon, they entered the battlefield itself. Carefully, they stepped over forgotten corpses, bloody gore and armaments alike. The baleful smell of death singed the sensitive hairs of Subaru's nose as they quietly made their way across the

clearing. In mere moments, they were on the dwindling edges of the forest, and with a couple steps, they found themselves enshrouded under the safe protection of the trees.

It was early morning, of course, and the cool breeze of the chilly night made Subaru shiver. The wispy winds ruffled all the feathers of the peaceful forest, and a small measure of peace washed over his being as he welcomed the breathing world back into his life. He looked over to his partner who walked quietly beside him. Her silver, shoulder length hair shone with radiance in the moon-lit view, and other than the signs of sleep gracing the undercurrents of her tired eyes, she seemed completely at peace.

Subaru also knew, by the expressionless look on her face, his *new* partner had become surer of herself than ever before. Carefully, he reached a finger or two within the confines of his robe and brushed his fingers over the dark leather-bound book within his pocket. He felt the warmth of its touch spread across him, calling out to him to release it from its jail. It called to him, yearning for someone to turn its mysterious pages once more. It was lonely, he knew, and he was the only person who could give it comfort.

It had been sometime since he had wandered its pages. What had changed? What had stayed the same? He felt the pangs of curiosity beckon him to delve deep into its mutable words once more, and yet, he did nothing more than touch it. He knew its presence affected his lover deeply, and until she could completely comprehend its unearthly foresight, he would not release it from its prison so near her company.

And his new authority—not those shadowy hands which bore the identity of such a power channeled by the previous Archbishop of Sloth—caused him to strain his mind in order to comprehend its ability. Much alike the gospel which rest within his grasp, it had given him such an ability akin to foresight. It was a gentle step, a brief glimpse into a future which might not come to pass at all. It was shockingly lifelike, so *real*—indeed, he knew not whether it was a dream or a waking memory. And yet, when he read his gospel within that waking nightmare, it spoke of the untimely end which befell his lover. When he had awoken anew, he made the snap decision to alter the aforementioned events by plunging themselves into the chasm of old, and the books' pages had seemingly rewritten themselves to a new future all of its own. He knew not how it activated, and yet an ability of its ilk required a name.

The Authority needed a name befitting of such divinity, he thought. The power to see a potential future... to feel it, *taste* it, even... and to have that future in the palm of his hand and change it at a second's notice. Surely enough, it wasn't as powerful as Return by Death by any stretch of the imagination. And yet, it had a separate qualitative uniqueness on its own right.

Thus, the Authority of Envy would be forever known by the name of, "*Divine Presage...*"

He had never expected to have the honor of wielding the power of his lover once again. He'd expected it forever gone, and himself locked in this world as nothing but a powerless individual. And yet, she had returned to him, and *bathed* himself in her love. It was unexpected, unanticipated, unpredicted, unplanned, uncalled for, serendipitous, sudden, abrupt, surprising, startling, astonishing, extraordinary. He ran a great many words through his mind to describe such events—yet found nothing worthy enough to attribute it. And within the love she had bestowed upon him, he had garnered a power unforeseen by all, except apparently *one*. He would dwell upon that mysterious girl later. In fact—

"Subaru—!!"

A hoarse scream, and yet it chimed beautifully like a bell as always. His thoughts interrupted, Subaru looked up from his hazy introspection as his eyes befell four Kingdom Knights sitting

around a cozy campfire roasting a flank of meat. They had been obscured by thick brush and shrubbery, and in a cruel fate, they stumbled upon them incidentally. *So that's where the cooking smell came from*, he thought darkly.

One man stood, drawing his blade. Three others followed suit.

Either way, something bad was about to happen. And he suddenly he realized why they were so hostile. The frightened voices of young knights filled the air:

"A silver-haired half-witch?!"

"They don the robes of the Witch Cult!"

"Where's Commander Melahau and the others?!"

"They haven't returned from the caverns yet!"

Their panicked and fragmented sentences filled the air as they stared wordlessly at their newfound foes. Sure enough, Satella had forgone her magical cloak, and her presence was exposed for all to see. Their choice of clothing didn't improve matters, either.

Without warning, a crossbow bolt, shot out of panic, buried itself deep in the shoulder of an astonished Subaru. He recoiled, falling backwards, and yelped in pain.

Satella, feeling a hatred swell within her, raised an outstretched palm in the direction of the assailant. A brief whisper of an incantation spoken in desperation, and then a silver spear of ice propelled by magic whistled through the night sky. It pierced one of the knights in his chest, blowing him into the darkness behind as he let out an ear-piercing scream.

"Thaler!" cried one of the knights.

She turned away briefly as she realized what she had done. The emotion, the *hatred* within her was so raw, she committed the act without a second thought. Her sorrowful eyes briefly turned to Subaru who lay on the ground, pierced by an arrow and dazed. He was struggling to stand back up.

There was a swooshing sound through the air as a blade fell against a protective barrier in front of Satella. Two knights had charged at her, but only one blade had connected the brittle ice-shield as the other comically missed. Erected without an incantation, it broke apart into pieces—a testament to its weakness.

As the shattered fragments were sent into all directions, Satella quickly pressed two soft palms against the assailing knight, her smaller body sliding into his personal space unhindered, and in an instant, two chilly explosions drilled against him, sending him flying backward with a caved-in chest and spurting blood into the night sky. The other knight, recovering from his miss and building up his nerve, swung diagonally from above, and the blade passed harmlessly by her, colliding with dirt. She chanted furiously, outstretching a hand—

And the world went dark for Satella.

Her spinning body soared through the air after it was smacked by a powerful spell conjured from the earth. Unbeknownst to her, as she fended off the knights in defense of her lover, one of them had gone unnoticed, preparing a long incantation to strike at the opportune moment. And it struck true; a wall of malformed rock wrest from the earth itself, colliding against her head in the most violent way possible.

The half-elf's body splashed against a sturdy tree, and she fell to the ground lifeless.

"That'll teach that bitch!" the knight roared triumphantly.

Subaru, who had finally gotten his wits about him, looked up at the knights with a blazing flash of hatred. With the arrow sticking out of his shoulder near the collarbone, he stared them down with furious, grey eyes.

And as if his gaze itself could kill, the knight who had cast the spell turned into a bloody mist in a single instant. Lumps of flesh splattered across the scenery as forces unknown tore the knight to pieces, limb from limb, bones from flesh, exposing his internal organs to the calm night air—before those, too, disintegrated.

The one curiously still-living knight turned on his heel and disappeared into the woods, running for his life. A coward he was, an alive coward he remained. He knew better than to face such an enemy.

That left only one remaining knight standing his way, heavily injured.

Knowing he wouldn't last long lying down on the ground, said knight cried out in a fury and attempted to raise his blade desperately. Yet, he found himself unable to move. The knight flailed his arms around as he hopelessly tried to break free from what invisible forces held him still, aggravating his thoracic injuries. Then, suddenly, his body was lifted off the ground, controlled by vile magic as he floated aimlessly, screaming at the top of his lungs until his voice grew hoarse and the blood he blew from his mouth dried up. Then, he was flung sideways, and felt immeasurable pressures from both sides.

With a horrid scream, the middle of his body *snapped* around a thick tree like a twig. His upper body bent one direction, and his lower extremities the other. He was, quite simply, split in half against the tree when the invisible force never abated, stretching his already-mangled corpse until the color of crimson spilt down the rugged bark, and no more could be spent. And, just moments later, the two pieces of the body fell discarded to the dirt.

The screams of help from the escaping deserter suddenly stopped, too, as Subaru expended the slightest of energy to ensure no one would disturb their moment again.

Subaru didn't speak, nor did he pay attention or derive pleasure from the carnage. In a trance, he raced over to the motionless body of his love. Kneeling next to her, he cradled her bloodied head in the crook of his arm. Her eyes were lidded, yet she still drew breath. Sighing deeply to himself, Subaru reached his arms underneath her legs, picking her up in his arms. Tired as he was, due to his newfound strength, she was light as a feather.

He grimaced to himself as he observed her unconscious visage. His frown deepened as he saw just how deep the gash was in the side of her head, though relatively little blood was flowing. His inaction had led to her getting grievously injured, and he couldn't forgive himself for it. He hesitated simply because he did not wish to fight with the Kingdom Knights. Even a supposed Archbishop as he was, he did not view them as an enemy, and yet, donning the unmistakable robes of a cult member, the knights instinctually struck at them.

With the arrow still sticking out of him, he took a shaky step down into the gnarled woods. He didn't know where they were going, but all he knew is he wanted to get away from here, and *fast*. The twisted world felt familiar to him, as he walked with the half-elf cradled unknowingly in his arms. It's how this journey began, he thought. And with every step, he remembered what he had sworn to his soul just a month ago, as he trudged aimlessly through the frozen wastes of the Sanctuary. The words, spoken a number of times, were well known to him:

"I *will* save you... I promise," he whispered under a labored breath.

And as he disappeared into the darkness with his lover... his *obsession*, and the only reason for his existence, he reaffirmed that oath once more...

*I know which is my fate
Bond to Erian's old tale
I'll be always there
Fighting the ancient sin
Moon shine in this eternal night*

Part Three - The Looking Glass Identity

*Mirrors reflecting
The broken illusion of one lost
And sinful Mind's eye protect me
While caught in this dark world of fear
And fading hope*

My soul is worn

Just before dawn—she wasn't sure what hour it was—Emilia finally stirred from her seemingly endless unconscious and sat up to take in her new surroundings. The coruscating colors of the world, born anew, swirled and churned in circles as her infant eyes adapted to the harshness of life. Even so, she could tell there was naught but the lesser spirits to share her amity in the confines of her new lodging.

She herself knew not where she was, nor did she know how she arrived at such a location; lying alone in bed, with nothing but her own musings to keep her company. Now she looked upon the recently swept floors of her bedroom, noticing the immaculate appearance of the floorboards, and then to the wooden carved chair next to her. An adolescent fire nestled upon a stone hearth, crackling and dancing with life in the corner of the room. The high windows to her left allowed the late stars of the young morning to bleed through the half-drawn curtains, illuminating the room in an eerily beautiful glow.

The light *pitter-patter* of soft bare feet against smooth wood filled the air as Emilia took gentle steps toward the balcony. Dressed in a dark-silken gown with her creamy narrow shoulders exposed, it fell just above her ankles and billowed as she moved. Then, a brisk wind came up to capture her majestic silver hair as she stepped out onto the elegant gallery.

In the distance, she could just make out striking golden banners flapping in the eastern winds from a towering spire in front of her. The argent moon, desperate for its own slumber, had long since sank below the horizon, and yet she could still discern the gloomy silhouette of a sleeping city all on its own. Young as the day was, the familiar bustling sound of dragon-drawn carriages came from below, though lighter than the royal capital.

Stepping back into the room once more, Emilia shivered. Icy-cold and biting as the moonless night air was, it had also breached her formerly-cozy and warm refuge, basking it in a frigid temperature, numbing her fingertips and painting her pale skin, normally tinged with a light red-flush, an unhealthy bluish color.

And on the bed—on a pillow, to be precise—was a palm-sized cat with grey fur and floppy ears, standing upright on its hind legs. It greeted with a raised paw and smiled at her, underlined with a deep sadness.

"Good morning, Lia," Puck said quietly, his glassy blue eyes holding Emilia's widened own for a long moment.

She didn't—*couldn't*—move. Neither of them moved, actually, until it became apparent Emilia was trembling. Puck held both paws out to calm her, but she took a hasty step back to further the distance between each other. "Keep away from me," she said harshly, turning her gaze from his own.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know you must be upset at me, Lia... but I had no choice—"

"—I know *you* broke *our* contract," she whispered quickly. Her hands clenched and unclenched repeatedly, as every unthinkable and unutterable syllable came from her lips. "And I know that *you* abandoned *me*, and yet *you* have the gall to show yourself into *my* quarters as if you slept a mere night...!"

Even though she dared not make eye contact, she could hear an audible gasp escape the greater spirit's throat. The fire which had brought warmth to the room had long since been drowned out, throttled mercilessly by the chilly mana escaping from every convulsion and whimper the spirit suffered. The room itself had turned from an inviting abode to a frost-bitten tundra, and soon, it would be uninhabitable.

Neither spoke for a time, and Emilia suddenly felt very lightheaded. Knees weak, and with a trembling step, she fell forward, but caught herself on the edge of a desk. Using it for support, she stabilized herself and took in several deep, desperate breaths through her mouth.

"I didn't break our contract to abandon you," Puck said, his voice distant and cold, much like the room itself. "I know you feel I have betrayed your trust, and I'm ready to accept the consequences for my actions," he added, as his eyes brimmed with tears. "I'm so sorry, Lia, and I hope one day, you will find it within your heart to accept an apology from someone as lowly as myself."

Hearing his dejected words, she turned to face him once more. Her heart ached to see him in such an aggrieved state. Even if her sorrow from his actions was immeasurable, she didn't want to hurt him, as she loved him as the father she never had. Never before had she seen him in such ways, as before his mettle proved to be both stout and long-lasting. It was because of this, she believed it to be a representation of his sincerity—that his grief was real, and so was his purpose to return to her. She forced a small smile, and after a few careful steps, she took one of his small paws between her thumb and forefinger. It quivered in her grasp, but was warm and inviting, freezing as their surroundings might have been.

Puck looked up at her. Mere seconds passed by as her beautiful eyes bore holes into his own, and he squeezed them shut. He didn't have the willpower to face her in his weakest moment. By now, the tears cascading down his fur had frozen solid, but more threatened to fall at any moment.

Taking a deep breath, Emilia said, "Puck, I know you have your reasons for breaking your promise with me, and I know you feel as if you have wronged me. Nobody has ever hurt me the way you did, and that... I shan't ever forget. But do not fret, as I will accept your apology."

The spirit cat's body-long tail curled lovingly around himself. He said nothing, though, shocked at how easily she had forgiven him. Their relationship would have been difficult to damage beyond repair, he figured, and yet still he feared this moment more than anything else in his centuries of existence. She had dreaded a different sort of reaction, but suddenly realized she had successfully mended their frozen bond. It was something of a miracle, she thought.

He asked, "You... You truly have forgiven me?"

She knew their bond had grown frail; cracked, even. Just over a month ago, such a question would seem moot. "Of course, I forgive you," she claimed prosaically, even if such a thing seemed distant in regards of recent events. "I don't know your reasons for breaking your promise to me, or our contract, but in the end, it will not matter. I don't wish to hear why you did such a thing, as that would only further the distance between us. You see... Subaru and I have been through much in our journey to find you a new home, and I would do nothing to spoil such efforts."

"At your request, I will withhold such information," he said, as his unfolded ear twitched. "But, tell me... Lia, where is Subaru?" His icy eyes narrowed as he breathed the name.

She closed her eyes at that. Scattered memories rushed through her mind, and she remembered now; having fled the Witch Cult hideout, they had made their way down the mountainside of Mount Cordor. There, they'd encountered a band of knights, and were attacked without warning. That's where such memories end, and thus she knew not where Subaru had gone or went, or how she even got here. It didn't help her sleep these past days was formless and dreamless... almost death-like, in fact.

Opening her eyes once more, she withdrew her arm. She said carefully, looking down at the pensive spirit cat. "I don't know where he is. In fact, I was beginning to fear something terrible may have befallen him, and you brought me here by myself. But, since you have revealed that is not the case, then I would assume Subaru was the one to bring me to this place."

Her 'father' stirred then. She watched him draw a deep breath into lungs the size of her finger, and then slowly let it out. "Then it is as I have feared," she heard him say breathlessly, and after a short pause, he continued, "Would it be too much if I asked you to abandon him and return to Elior Forest, with just the two of us like before? I know this is a sudden request, but Subaru has undertaken a dark path unforeseen to myself. I don't feel you are safe in his company anymore... and I fear the worst for his future."

A small cry escaped her, his words a devastating punch to her gut. After a moment, she regained her composure. "What you say... is simply not true," Emilia said, wincing from the pain his words wrought. "Please, Puck... don't think of Subaru like that. What happened back at Mount Cordor... it was something that was out of his own control. Please, you have to understand."

"Oh, Lia," he said, "Even though I did not make my presence known, I saw everything that happened within that cavern, even the things which *you* did not see. I would not be asking you to abandon Subaru like this, if my reasons for doing so were not suitable."

"You... You were spying on us?!" she hissed, shattering the cordial mood like a glass vase crashing against the floor. "That means... you saw us..." Her face, flushed with an incensed fury, deepened to a further red.

"I was *always* watching over you," he corrected her. There was no shame in his words.

He watched her wrestle with that. But before he could speak again, she said, "You had no right to watch us while we shared our intimacy, or at any point! Our contract was broken, and yet you still lingered around, like a starved demon beast stalking its prey. And where were *you* when I cried myself to sleep every night in the tomb, or when I was molested by those bandits?! When Subaru was not there to protect me, by no fault of his own, I suffered horrifying indignities! Where were *you*, Puck, when he and I met our darkest moments? That's right, as *I* was there for him... *He* was there for me... and not *you*."

She did not hold the harshness of her words back, and the tone of her voice bespoke a low tolerance for her father figure. Every volatile word—each pointed syllable piercing his skin like the sharpest arrowhead—devastated him more than she could ever know. He felt small before her, and she towered in her demeanor, the rising tenor of her voice casting a shadow over him as if to engulf his unearthly being.

He said, meekly, "I didn't mean to... When those things happened, I couldn't... Lia, please, you have to understand, I would never intentionally place you in harm's way! You have to believe me... You believe me... don't you?"

She shook her head despondently and watched his tiny shoulders droop in sadness. She turned, looking out the tall windows. It was still dark outside, the young sun still yet to rise up to signal the passing of yesterday. The blue-sun days were upon them, and the chilly air proved this to be true. By now, the frosty-mana pouring from the spirit had dwindled in its discharge, his gate unconsciously closing due a hammering shock to every fiber of his spectral being.

By the time Emilia had turned her hard-hearted gaze back to the dispirited cat, he seemed to be translucent, spirit-particles flowing off the fading contours of his shape like dust. His time in the earthly world was coming to an end.

"Whatever your reasons for breaking our contract," she said more softly, careful to control her anger. "There is no excuse for keeping watch on us like that, especially as you sat idly when instead, you could have come to our aid."

"I only did what I did to protect you," he replied. "And I only ever had your interests and greater welfare in mind. Past, present, and future... my decisions were made for *you*, and you alone."

"*Protect* me?!" she asked, feeling a strong vexation grow within her. "I fail to understand the twisted logic you must have to believe what you did protected me from *anything*. If it wasn't for Subaru, I wouldn't even be here right now, and yet you ask me to leave him?!"

Puck hesitated. "Subaru has taken the dark path," he whispered solemnly. "He carries on his shoulders not just the burden of all which has happened, but even the sins of the past. The darkness which follows him, the ever-creeping shadows yet impossible to escape, will consume him before your very eyes. I have seen *her*, and if you follow him hand-in-hand, there can only be one ill-fated destination."

She nodded. "And you ask me to leave him to this doom?"

Puck's face contorted in anguish. "I only ask that you *survive*, and that's all I ever wanted."

He had selfish reasons, she realized. He did not care what happened to Subaru, if it meant her own survival. Indeed, he hadn't considered *her* own feelings, in the grand scheme of things. "You besmirch yourself with this plea," was all she said. "Puck, I cannot do what you have asked of me, no matter the cost."

He said, after a moment: "Then, is there no way I can convince you? My time here is growing short, and I haven't the tongue for it. If you truly doubt my intentions, then I will take my leave."

His intentions, she thought, sickened. He may have had her best interests at heart, as selfishly as it would appear. Yet, he never once considered her feelings. Never once did he realize she loved Subaru more than himself, and that she could not exist in a world devoid of him. It was an appalling feeling, to realize her paternal figure misunderstood her in every way made possible. She didn't wish to concern herself with it anymore. In fact, she was better off forgetting Puck, if this was the way things were going to be.

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked tersely.

"Lia, *please*, come with me," he replied, a sorrowful resignation evident in his voice. "Don't make me watch this happen to the one whom I love more than anyone..." His eyes welled with tears, threatening to fall at any moment.

"I won't," she said. "There isn't any future for us together if your stance does not change. It may hurt you for me to say this, but I believe it's best for both of us... if you find a new contractee."

Cherished was our time together, but it has come to such an end, and I don't wish to see you suffer like this."

Her tone, while steady and calm, had undertones of distance; Puck's face lost all hope. "I see... so, this is the end for us," he said after a moment.

"It is."

Her own emotions got the better of her. Her stony façade shattered, and she turned away from Puck as tears of her own began to form. Ne'er did he see them fall, however, and she never met eyes with him again.

Her heart began beating rapidly, and she did not know how long it was before she mustered the courage to turn once more. The rising sun, anxious and wishing for a new day, finally began its cycle of rise into the sky. The first thin streaks of orange light poured through the half-drawn curtains of the room, and a growing warmth began to overtake the formerly-frigid room. Emilia stared down at the now-empty bed, devoid of any life, spirit or not. Tears streaked her distorted features, and she fell pitifully to the bed, wailing horribly. She hugged the pillow the cat formerly rested upon tightly, and it soon dampened by her sadness, soaking up every bodily fluid spilling endlessly from her.

And so Emilia wept, and the passages of time turned unknowingly around the girl who released all her grief upon the world. From all appearances, she was an emotional mess, stricken by the loss of someone so close to her. Yet, given the circumstance, it was something which had to be done. She had been so certain Puck would side with her, so certain he would see things from her point of view, and yet he didn't. The shock which caught her off guard more than anything else, was the quandary being she had to choose between her lover and her 'father'. It was, in essence, an easy choice to make—yet it was more onerous than anything which came before it.

Once, long ago, she had met Puck, himself being her first real contact with anyone after being imprisoned in an icy tomb for a hundred years. There, he took her under his wing, becoming somewhat of a surrogate father to her. For the most part, he taught her everything she knew. He taught her what it meant to love, as naïve as it was; he taught her how to laugh, and how to cry; and most of all, he taught her what it meant to live as a half-elf—living a demonized and persecuted existence for no reason other than having such a lineage. He was her guide, her beacon in the darkness... until Subaru came along and changed everything. Of course, that special torch which burned brightly for her had passed—might be even forced upon another through the machinations of another...

...and yet, she *still* couldn't let him go.

Which was one of the reasons why she wept as she did. For he who did asked her to do the unthinkable; for he who accorded her an ultimatum so pious and self-serving in its demands, brokered a deal which bent the very fabric of her reality. It was out of the question, to abandon her Subaru, and in his darkest hour no less. So, her tears followed one after another, downward and forgotten, as she mourned her losses and fond evocations of the past. And even if where those precious tears travelled mattered not, their impact as they met the Lugnic earth sent echoes throughout eternity: Those two griefs fusing to each other within her heart until her heart itself, a beating forge, welded them within the derelict library of her memory.

After some time, she dried her eyes on her dark-silken sleeve and lay still, if it were possible. Even if her tears were lessened, she still quivered and trembled, alone and afraid like a newborn babe. She didn't want to be alone, so locked away from the warmth of love and away from all things joyous. Her darkening thoughts absorbed and deafened every sensation of her senses, so much so

she failed to realize the door to her room had cracked open, and careful footsteps made their way toward her.

Something soft pressed against her from behind, and two sleeves of a black *kimono* reached underneath and over her to ensnare her. Still, she bleated and whimpered, so far removed from the waking world she failed to realize she had company. In response, the trespasser clasped his hand over her own, and stroked her hair lovingly, trying to calm her.

He waited, drawing his mouth closer to her ear. "I'm back now, it's okay," he whispered into her pointy ear. "Please, Satella. I'm here now, everything's going to be just fine."

Slowly, her hands, one entrapped by his own, began to tremble. Her whimpering continued, and his soothing words were lost to her ears. Her heart was shattered, pained, as if its jagged shards poked through her breast. Then, she let out a wailing cry which was stifled only by the narrow four corners of the room they lay in.

He squeezed her harder against him, listening carefully for any further response. He could feel her heartbeat, its erratic pounding against her chest threatening to break through its bony prison. It was by then he knew she was not in her right state of mind. This wasn't just the usual outburst of sadness the two had shared throughout their journey; it was something so debilitating she had lost all control of herself.

So he decided, and he wrapped his arms around her quivering form, lifting her up to cradle her like he would a child. He gently held her head, trying not to cause her any discomfort, and she looked up at him, now removed from the disparate jail of her sorrow. Her tear-bespeckled amethyst eyes blinked once, twice, as they looked at him in fascination as a newborn child would to her father.

She had entered his world, and she looked upon a Subaru who was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. His piercing grey eyes, both with the resolve of a man and the understanding of a woman, gazed steadily down at her, never wavering in its purpose. His lengthened hair with bangs falling over his forehead—formerly a charcoal-black—now had hints of grey and whites, as though he were middle-aged. Even with his young physical features, he had a maturity about him, like he had undergone some sort of enlightenment. Gone was the child-like wonder in his eye, the one she had formerly come to know and understand. Replaced in its stead was the gaze of someone far beyond his own years.

No one spoke. They just held their eyes, and soon the two found themselves leering at each other. Even though tears still painted her eyelids, no more fell as she found herself lost in the vibrant pale meadows of his silvery own. Then, a firm but gentle hand brushed over her forehead, pushing her ashen bangs to the side, before his hand spread itself across her cheek and caressed her lovingly.

Her heart aching for comfort, Emilia covered the warm hand on her cheek with her own, and she nuzzled into him receptively. She wanted him to fill the hole in her heart her 'father' had left her, wishing to be consumed by his love. It was her undying desire, for them to be as one, and while no words echoed this fact, her amorous eyes pled for such a passionate union.

Subaru laid her upon the bed, eying her with a lust all his own. Her gown was already cut low, the curvature of her well-endowed bosom begging to be released. Carefully, his finger travelled across her pale, creamlike skin and wrapped itself underneath one of her gown's shoulder straps. His finger trailed along her collarbone and down to her breast, taking the strap with him against its own terms. Her breasts spilt from their imprisonment as the gown's hold loosened. Full and high as they were, Subaru hovered closer, and could not help himself as he stared hungrily at them, the taut firmness of her aroused nipples begging for his attention.

Emilia stared back at him with a curious glint in her eye all her own, the earlier despair she once felt now completely forgotten, lost in the fervid world of her lover. Playing the seductress, a new role for her, she gently took his hand in her own and led it down to her breast, helping him decide what he was already going to do.

What was not already known was the heaven-sent fact Emilia's lips were now busy at the side of his neck, the sharp line of his jaw, and his ear—even as his own hand spread across her breast, allowing her aroused pink nipple to breathe some air from between his fingers. He gave her a tender, yet ardent squeeze, eliciting a moan which found itself tickling his ear. Going further, and burying his face between her breasts, he felt her nails tear at the skin of his back. He ignored the pain, however, and took one of her nipples in his mouth, running his tongue in circles over it eagerly. He heard her gasp.

She felt him pull back away from her, immediately longing for the comfort and warmth of his mouth around her forbidden areas. Then, she saw him fumbling with his robe, the numerous layers making it difficult for him to release himself. Growing impatient, her own fingers slid across the waist-string, pulling it with a need which begged to be satiated. One layer fell, and then another, setting him free.

"Oh, Satella!" he moaned as her nimble fingers first glided around his tip, then stroked his length. "That feels... Oh, my god, It's simply amazing. Please, that's too much." The newfound sensation of her hands around him threatened a release all too soon. Using gravity as his momentum, he twisted his head sharply and their lips finally met. He began to gather the folds of her gown up around her hips, as she fervently sped up her hands' movements prior to stopping.

Feeling his eager need, she settled herself against the bed as he arched her legs. There, he hovered over her, her breathing shallow and rapid at the trepidation of what wonders were to come. She felt him prod her sex, an unspoken request to take her for his own when she tilted her hips ever more upwards.

Emilia's answering smile was dazzling. Under the glow of the morning sun, she was more beautiful in that moment than he could have ever imagined a woman being. In those wide, glistening pools of lilac, he saw something stir within them; an arousing want, or a mixture of emotions impossible to understand. It didn't matter, because when he entered her fully, she closed them, and a small, twinkling tear escaped down the side of her cheek.

She gasped again, lost in an astonishment of pure pleasure. Subaru cupped her cheek, and murmured something into her ear, but she knew not what he was saying. She could feel his urgency, no doubt a response to her ever-growing need, and soon nothing else mattered than the gradually accelerating rhythm of his thrusts.

Subaru grunted, feeling his climax gathering as she allowed lovely noises of her own escape her rosy lips. He lifted her up slightly, as she wrapped her legs around him and buried her face into the crook of his neck. Their body heat coalesced, and soon the two were both soaked in the product of their toil and lovemaking. The tightness in his groin exploded, forcing him to hold her tightly against him as he released himself deep inside her.

She strained herself, and then relaxed, allowing herself to lay limp. In the end, she had ended up on top of him, and she was light enough to lay comfortably upon him. The erratic beating of his excited heart could be felt as she nestled herself against him. After a while, it began to slow, until it was finally at a resting pace once more.

Feeling exceptionally sleepy now that he had released himself, Subaru almost felt like he would fall asleep with her half-naked form above him like so. It wasn't until Emilia claimed his fingers

that he cracked an eye open to see her.

She withdrew her hand suddenly.

He raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

She breathed deeply, then let it out. "*Nothing* is wrong, Subaru," she murmured, averting her eyes from his own. "Everything is perfect when I'm with you like this. There isn't anything which could dampen such a moment."

Subaru looked at her concerningly. "Is that so? Then, maybe you should look at me in the eye when you say that, then I would believe you. I figured you would realize I always know what's going through that head of yours."

"Well, something *did* happen before you returned," said Emilia quietly.

"Oh? Do you want to talk about it?" Subaru asked her, careful to make it seem like he wasn't too prodding. He wanted her to feel comfortable with whatever she had to say.

"If you are interested," Emilia said briefly. "Then I will share it with you."

Subaru looked at her levelly. "The reason why I'm asking," he said. "Is because I *already* know who paid you a visit this early morning. It's actually why I left, so I could leave you two some privacy. I've been by your side ever since we got here, actually."

Emilia groaned, letting her displeasure be known to Subaru. He heard her say, "Then I suppose you read about it in your little book? Is there anything that *isn't* written in there? How am I supposed to keep secrets from you?"

"I'm really sorry," he whispered to her. "I only read what it shows me, and it doesn't show me *everything*. That was the reason why we ran into those Kingdom Knights like we did the other day. For some reason, that wasn't written in the book, though I don't know why. You know full well I'd do otherwise if it was."

Emilia waved a lazy hand. "That was quite the predicament," she said almost sarcastically, surprising Subaru with her tone. "I scarcely remember anything from that night. I think I may have hit my head."

Subaru reached over and touched the side of her head. "You were struck *here*," he said, brushing around to inspect what's underneath. "I'm surprised you remember anything that happened then, given how bad of a head injury you sustained."

"What *did* happen that night?" she asked.

Subaru turned away from Emilia, and then looked up at the ceiling. His hesitation was perhaps to afford a brief moment of recollection, or in retrospect of his actions that night. In the end, the result was the same:

"There's nothing much to talk about," he said ruefully, while running a hand through his hair. "After you got knocked out, I took out those knights who attacked us, and I carried you down the mountain on my back."

"You 'took them out'?" Emilia asked. "What's that mean?"

"I killed them," Subaru responded flatly. "I didn't have any other choice in the matter. I had to

defend you, so it was the only thing I could do. I doubt they would have listened to reason anyway."

He saw her flinch, then she closed her eyes. A terrible sadness passed over Emilia. She swallowed with some difficulty. "Oh, I see," she said. "It was an unfortunate circumstance, and I'm sorry it came to that."

Her eyes were still closed when he spoke. "If you can't remember, you did pretty well yourself," he said evenly. "They were the ones who initially started the fight, by shooting me in the shoulder with a crossbow bolt. You came to my defense while I gathered myself. If it wasn't for you, I'm not sure if I could have taken all of them at once." He took her hand and clasped it lovingly, the remembrance of such events causing such emotions.

"And what happened after that?" she retorted, her hands tightening around his own.

He pushed on as the events came back to him. "Down a little bit further, by luck, I found Patrasche hitched to a tree along with a couple other ground dragons," he said, smiling at the fact they were finally reunited. "So I rode her further southeast along the road until we came to the city of Flanders. Upon my arrival, the first thing I did was see that your wound was taken care of. I hired one of the best healers in Lugnica to take care of you, and they even healed your damaged gate a little bit. The rest is history."

With an effort, she managed a brief smile, but he could tell there was something somber within her eye. Devoid of anything but the natural light which poured through the windows, the room itself was dimly lit.

Such horrible events unsettled her, but there was hope. "It's just like you to take care of me like that," she said, drawing a long breath afterward. "So, we're in the birthplace of the earth dragons, then. Puck told me about this place once. He said many years ago, a big event took place here between the Divine Dragon and the peoples of Lugnica."

"Indeed," he said quickly. "It doesn't unsettle you to be here, does it?"

"No, why would it?" she retorted, her hands loosening around his own.

He pushed that comment to the side. "Oh, I'm just wondering about how you're feeling, that's all."

"Subaru, please don't play any games with me!" She wasn't angry, but just upset at how he flatly denied her an explanation.

"I'm not playing any games. Just think of it as a mild concern, besides..." He drew a breath. "The reason why I brought us here is not just to heal you. Maybe you haven't seen it yet, but this place may seem a little bit familiar to you, after all."

"I've never once stepped foot within these gates," she said reflexively. "In fact, I have never once been east of the capital in my entire life."

This silenced him. He sat up briefly and then looked at her curiously. She could see the usual playfulness painted across his face, and yet it seemed as if he were worried all the same. The quietness which followed his stare was awkward, to say the least. "I see," he said briefly, and then continued, "If that's the case, then that would make the text within my book fiction, wouldn't it?"

"I'm not sure," she said briefly. "I have never read your book before, nor do I want to."

"I didn't say you have to read it," he said. "In fact, I don't think you *could* read it even if you

wanted to. Whatever words it has said to you are not written down, so I would never know about them."

This made her feel uneasy, and an uncomfortable feeling washed over her. She resisted the urge to step away from him, the very thought of the book's words perusing her mind a scary thought indeed. She said, "It's more than enough for me. Any more than that, and I don't think I could stand being around it any longer."

Subaru let a small laugh escape him. "So be it," he eked out. "You two really need to get along. Of course, I love you more than the damned book, but its wisdom has done nothing but aid me so far. I have no reason to doubt its intentions, ill as they may be or not."

"My opinion on the book is final," she said, shifting backward some more. She looked to her left at the wall. She said, "It's already shared enough of its wisdom with me. I highly doubt it has anything constructive to offer."

"Have it your way, then," he replied, accepting defeat.

Subaru stood up and turned to look at her. Emilia, caught off guard, turned a curious eye back to her partner, who looked down upon her with interest. A momentary pause followed.

Surprisingly, Emilia turned to him and said, "Is there something here that catches your eye?" Her tone was humorous, playfully poking at the fact she was, indeed, still half-naked from their dance earlier.

Subaru smiled. "So, what did you and Puck talk about?" he asked, crossing both arms for effect. "I left you two the private time to sort out your issues, so what became of it?"

Resting on both arms, Emilia leaned back. "Well, Puck..." she started and then paused, looking down at the damp wood of the floor. The frost formerly covering it had melted. "Puck came to formalize the breaking of our contract... He said he was happy the two of us are together as we are now, and that he would allow us the space we need." Her voice was low, quiet to a point where it was barely audible.

Subaru's eyes narrowed. "I see," he replied, scratching his chin in thought. "Is that all he said? And he didn't even give me a goodbye? I find that to be curious, you know."

"I suppose so," Emilia replied shortly. "He just wished us the best and vanished without a trace."

"That's too odd."

It did seem that way, she realized. Her skill of deception was poor. She said, "Puck will be okay without me, I'm sure of it..." She looked down at her frail fingers, still as they were, before cupping them together.

There was a slight shuffling in the background as Subaru began to put his robe back on, managing to fully clothe himself when she turned her eye to him. He smiled down at her, before reaching into a pouch by his waist-band.

Her breath caught in her throat once he revealed what he held in his palm, as she let out a small gasp. "Is that...?" she started, before Subaru nodded to her. "That's—"

"It's a Pyroxene crystal," he affirmed, as it glowed mystically upon the palm of his hand. "I found it within your cultist robe I had to dispose of. I thought it was curious why such a thing would be in your pocket, but then I remembered why we travelled there in the first place."

She could feel the tears welling in her eyes yet again, but she struggled to keep them abated.

Indeed, that was the reason they had gone there. He went on, "I figured you still wanted it. Perhaps it will still have its uses in the future. Here, take it."

The verdant green crystal plopped down upon her cupped hands. It might have well been molten rock, because its very touch burnt into her soul as if the contract of life itself faltered. She stared it down helplessly, her face seemingly unconcerned, yet inside she felt her heart break in two.

"Don't look too happy now," he said, not entirely sure what she was thinking right now. "I'm glad I remembered to search through your belongings before I tossed them. I was lucky to find that tiny thing in your robe."

There was no reply. Emilia waited a moment, and then slowly let out a breath she didn't even know she was holding. She turned her head to face him and gave him a smile, fake as it was.

Their journey to Cramlin; to that evil place, she realized, had all been for nothing. Once, they travelled there in search of one thing: this very Pyroxene crystal... for Puck. In the end, they became pawns of the Witch Cult, and such lifechanging events took place. The irony of it all—for Puck always being by their side—was far too much for her to take in at once. If she really sat there and thought about it, it only made matters worse. For now, she would push it to the far corners of her mind, locked away with the rest of her fragmented memories. It was the only way to keep going like this.

"Is there something wrong, Satella?" she heard him say, snatching her from such thoughts. "You look like you're *really* thinking about something hard over there. Let's talk about it."

He called her it again. It was *that* name again... that cursed byname which bespoke of the Witch of Envy.

Quickly, almost without knowing it, she heard herself reply, "*My name's not Satella!*"

She knew not what she was saying, and instantly, she regretted every syllable made audible. She would have ripped her tongue out herself, just to bleed to death, if to prevent such words from being uttered.

Taken aback, Subaru looked at her with a surprise painted across his face. He stepped backward a little, and then looked upon her once more curiously. Quickly, he stuck his hand into his robe, and as if it manifested from thin air, he withdrew the gospel once more. Without a word, he flicked the book open, and then scrutinized its wicked text.

Emilia, who had cowered behind a pillow by now to shield herself from the watchful eye of the abominable text, said nothing to calm him. In truth, she didn't know what to say. She didn't know what words she could offer him in this moment, nor did she know if any word from her at all would bear any meaning to him now. She was utterly afraid... afraid to lose her last real connection to anyone in this cold, bleak world.

She suddenly felt very cold.

With his pointer finger, Subaru flicked frantically through the pages, until he came to a certain spot. Carefully, he read whatever was etched on its pages, and his eyes widened from the miniscule creases of his young face. His maddening eyes darted from the pages of the book, over to the shrinking girl in the corner of the room, and then he turned to the book one final time. His frown slowly morphed to a knowing smile, as if he felt like jumping for joy.

Subaru glanced amusingly at Emilia, and then walked over to her, book in hand. Callously, he took the pillow she shuddered behind and knelt next to her, with the book open for her shuttered eyes to see.

"Get it away from me!" she shrieked, as she tried to push him away. "I don't want to see it, please!"

The expression in his grey eyes belied the plea in his voice. "Satella, look at it," he whispered, as he held the book open for her to read once more. "Look at the words. They speak truths, even if you wish not to read them."

With care, she cracked one fearful eye open and looked down at the pages. There, she saw foreign words she had never seen before. It was a language much different than anything she had come to know across Lugnica. The boldened letters were a blood-red, and neatly calligraphed from one side of the small pages to another.

"Do you see it?" Subaru asked excitedly. "Do you see what it says? Look past the book, look past the paper, and the blood, and tell me what you see." He pointed to a specific sentence near the bottom of the page.

Emilia looked harder at the book... but saw nothing. The words were unreadable, and the living book was not speaking to her like before. She shook her head discouragingly.

"Look at this sentence here, and these words," Subaru insisted, placing his finger below them for direction. "It says, '*Upon thy return, thee shalt find the Witch of Envy, Satella, resting upon thy bed*'."

She wept quietly, the realization of such a thing seemingly impossible. She was wordless as the revelation came from him.

"Now that you've seen it with your own eyes," he said. "Do you understand now? The book knows all."

He paused, taking a deep breath, and then looked her dead in the eye as he spoke:

"It tells me your *real* name."

Evil Mind, Evil Sword

Behind the bygone manor near the back walls of the compound is a gazebo made of rosewood. It rests among fruit trees bearing appas and flower beds of the golden kind, far removed from the crowded streets of Flanders and just past the exotic bamboo grove with its laid-out paths made of natural stone, through the old arbor overgrown with unfamiliar vines and ivy, and beside the morning sun-kissed artificial lake.

For her, the calmness of her new surroundings dulls her uneasy nerves. She doesn't know why, but the scenery seems both intimate and dear to her. Even the rosewood and its scented aroma, which she loves, relaxes her with every sweet-smelling breath. Its auburn color is striking, with bold, dark lines running through it, and then thinner ones between those as if they wrestle with each other to reach the surface, to break through their wooden imprisonment. In the gentle morning glow, you can see that, envision that. The rosewood comes from the forests of Gusteko to the north, near the border where they usually grow undisturbed, and from whence it is imported into the kingdom at a rate and expense reserved for only the upper echelons of society.

From her days growing up in Elier Forest, she remembers the sound of the early morning birds when she made her rounds around the wood. She hears them here too, she thinks, but their sound is more subdued, somber even, as if they were in mourning. They are a welcomed, but unexpected guest, as their song is most often heard during the red-sun season, and it's quite late in the year to expect them this morning.

She has wandered this way alone, clutching the empty vessel of a spirit in her left hand as she walked through the break of day. Once a trinket redolent of fond feelings and comfort, it is now but a symbol of her despair. Soothing as the tranquil scenery is, her firm grip on the thing loosens, but still it brings forth memories best left forgotten, and feelings so unpleasant she wishes only to part with it forevermore.

It is brighter now. Except for the birds and the rising sun, she is alone. As the latter's glimmering form cuts through the light canopy of trees lining the compound's walls, majestic rays of gold and orange reach down as if to greet her as she takes her graceful steps along the pathway. She had been overwhelmed, and Subaru knowingly strayed behind, allowing her to take a walk of solace to gather her thoughts. She figures he knew she wanted to get away from that confined place, and at the very least he understood she wished to be alone, if not for a moment.

She is truly alone here, she realizes. Famished lungs fill with a deep breath, and then empty once more. The fresh air subdues her like always, and the crispness of what she is breathing currently was no doubt of a finer quality than that of the capital. Another reason to enjoy the morning, she muses.

And as she sits comfortably on a bench in the rosewood gazebo, her thoughts seldom stray from the recent events which have defined her life. There's an ache behind her temples when she recalls such things, and the feelings, raw and new, return all at once. She remembers the melancholy of unwilling separation, the heartache of battle, the passion of love, and even the pleasures of sex. It returns, that warm tingling feeling near her abdomen. She feels lightheaded enough to settle back against the bench, strung out from such deep desire and zeal.

Her gentle but spirited eyes stray to the left. There's a lagmite lit lantern, which dangles from the roof of the gazebo's wooden beams. Moths flutter around it. Amongst the trees is a pale luminescence. Fireflies she presumes, and she watches them fondly for a time. They are reminiscent of her friends—the little spirits, and she laments the absence of their company. She

does love to be one with nature, and in this moment, she figures there's no better time to indulge such pastimes.

She raises a listless finger into the air and shutters her eyes. A small vibration near the tip. Then, a spreading warmth as it grows throughout her being. The crease of her narrowed brow's folds deepen further. Ever so slightly, she strains her mind, and then she hears the thoughts of disembodied voices echo from within.

She smiles somberly, as she knows she is no longer alone. It's safe to open her eyes, she assumes, and when she does, she's greeted with the humming glow of small, twinkling lights numbering more than she would ever bother counting.

The compound has been quiet since she took her first steps into the garden. Her lips move, but no sound follows when it should. She hears a reply, the whispers of voices long since silenced, so she greets them in her own way. Small as they are, there's no wonder why they eagerly prod her for secrets; recent events prevented such communications for quite some time. She blames herself, but spirit-arts users are a rarity, she believes, so they must be lonesome beings indeed.

Their silent conversation goes on. After a bit of idle chatter, one smaller spirit—a blue one—decides to hover a bit too close. For its size, it's quite warm, but energetic and filled with youth. It's translucent almost, a juvenile to be sure. It floats near her abdomen, determined in its path, and then up her face, where it bobs up and down curiously. Then, the spirit buzzed, as if it beat tiny, invisible wings furiously.

She raises her pale hand to her mouth, its noiseless words alarming to hear. Its name is Lye, and it wants to share a secret with her, she understands, away from the others, it pleads. Her hand motions for the little one to come forward to allow it her ear in privacy. It speaks in silence, out of sight, and out of mind from its friends, yet, the surprise on her face is spelt out in letters bold and unmistakable.

Her cheeks are red, she feels this. The growing heat of her face stifles her breath, and it's no simple task to regain control. The spirits know this, see this, as they look from her to one another anxiously, unsure of what to do. The little blue one disappears first, not eager to share its secret with its brethren. So, they follow suit, vanishing one after another into the netherworld where none may hide for long.

She's alone again, left perturbed and without the comfort of another. Such a revelation was not expected in this moment. *Maybe it needs to be like this*, she thinks. *So none may see her tears fall.*

Fall they do, and more well up to take their place. She can't decide whether they are tears of joy, or tears of sadness. Maybe, a bit of both, she decides.

The scent of the wood, the coolness of the air. The season has changed now. But she won't weep for the past—nor the passages of time—for much like the Great Waterfall, it goes on everflowing, unconcerned with such mortal matters. No, she weeps now for something much greater than that. Yet, to take control once more, she dries her tears on her dark sleeve and refocuses.

The crystal she was clutching has since been left discarded on the gazebo's rosewood floor. Forgotten it lays, like the wispy winds of yesterday. She now rests against the wide, smooth waist-high railing, as she looks out into the garden. It's a bit chilly out, for a morning in Lugnica anyway. Her dark, off-the-shoulder gown, is now thankfully blanketed with an outer covering to match the cool air. Black as tar, the silk is exceptional, to contest her almost gaudy surroundings. Roswaal dressed her in similar extravagance, albeit with brighter shades of the spectrum. She knew and understood these wealthy types quite well, by now.

No doubt the gown was cut from the same cloth as the owner of the manor.

She is on her feet like so because she heard someone approaching—from the pathway leading to the bamboo grove, the one that eventually leads to the manor's exit.

The one lantern casts a low light, drowned out by the looming beacon of morning. The gazebo will seem like a lost cabin in an old forest, she imagines, a refuge, sanctuary for a wary traveler. She feels that, as if it shields her from the harms of the outside world.

She hears the light thud of footsteps, and he is here.

If this gazebo was her shield, then he was her fortress, a stalwart both hardy and unbreaking. Yet, she is unsteady, as if she had one too many wines. *No tears*, she reminds herself. *Don't let him see the tears.*

She has not expected him so soon. Then again, she has had no real idea what to expect since embarking on this journey. He's approaching now, dressed in his black robe again. She doesn't know what to call it, but she thinks it's a garb from Kararagi. With a left foot on one of the steps, the other on the gazebo, he looks up at her. There's a concerning look marring the young features of his handsome face. She just wishes he would smile again. She yearns for that smile.

As if he read her thoughts, his soft lips curve to a small smirk. Yet, that bothersome look of worry is still concealed from within.

Her gaze meets his own. It's subtle, but she sees his waver ever so slightly. Those grey, mystical eyes, unnerving and ethereal. Unlike before, it's so difficult to see what lies beneath them.

She murmurs, "You have come to me so soon, Subaru."

He says, "I saw you from the windows of the manor. You looked like you needed some company."

His voice is enough to undress her, she thinks shamefully. Why, is it like so? Just how, she wonders, does one's voice have such an impact on one's soul, charmed and soothed by his very sound. Why him, and no one else? She knows the answer to the question. Even still, she feigns innocence.

"I came to this place, I think, to be alone," she says, though more callous than intended. "Although, your presence is not all together discomforting..."

He steps up to the gazebo anyway. When he looks at her, his face, beneath the amber glow of the lantern, shows the intensity she has come to expect. She looks away. She needs to do that. She says, "I can seldom hold eyes with such a stare."

He looks away from her. "Have I really changed so much? If I can recall, I used to be the one to turn away first. Is there something wrong with my face?"

She wants to laugh at his joke but doesn't. She says, "Other than the change of eye, and hair color? I'm afraid not, you're the same boneheaded boy from when I first met you."

"Boneheaded? That's a new one. I'm impressed, really."

She allows herself a smile. She sees him notice that. "I thought you might be. But on a more serious note... where are we?"

He hesitates. Something unusual for him, she decides. "Of course, we're in Flanders, you already

know that. But this manor and compound belongs to Russell Fellow. Perhaps you know the name?"

She nods. She's thankful for his honest response, to know where she is. "I know of the name. He's high up there in the Merchant's Guild. He knows we are alive then; can we trust him?"

"We can trust him," he says, simply.

She ignores that. Says, "I'm being serious here, Subaru. I want you to explain *why* we can trust him."

"This isn't the first time we've met."

"You two have a history together?"

He affirms that with another nod. "A while back, he assisted in brokering a business transaction between me and another, to afford Lady Crusch mining rights within the Mathers dominion. It was a simple thing really."

A simple thing, she muses. Completing such a transaction without the lord's notice and with Russell Fellow, no less. Very simple, indeed. A vain man, and her humble knight.

She says, "So one business transaction affords such trust?"

He is silent for a moment, looking at her. It wasn't a stare of love like before, something more curious maybe. He's thinking, she assumes.

Eventually he says, "Whether we can trust him or not is meaningless. The man knows more than we do, and I believe he knew of our survival in the first place. He has spies all over the kingdom, I think."

She turns and rests her arms on the waist-high railing of the gazebo. She gazes into the wood. He can't read the emotions on her face now. So, she draws a deep breath, says, "With that aside, have you decided on what my name is?"

His expression is lost to her, but she hears, "The book isn't wrong, Satella."

"And you think I don't know myself?" She is upset, but the rude tone of her voice is unintentional.

Subaru only nods. "I'm not saying that." He hesitates again. He's being careful about his words, she decides, careful not to hurt her feelings. "I'm saying that you have been misled about who you *really* are. The book just doesn't lie." His words are sincere, she can tell.

"I sincerely doubt someone would lie about such a thing," she says. He hasn't moved closer to her since she turned, neither has she, from her place by the railing. She sees fireflies deep within the woods. Hears insects in the garden. There is a silence between them.

"People have done worse things to you," he says, finally.

She knows, understands that. Yet, she doesn't care.

"I'm just Emilia," she says. "That's who I have been for as long as I can remember."

"But don't... don't you want to learn the truth?"

She finally turns back to him; a smile graces her lips. Her smile was always an effective instrument

she could use to woo him.

“The truth matters to me, yes.”

“Then, let’s search for that truth, Emilia.”

“Oh, Subaru, I love you so much.”

She hadn’t meant to be so abrupt with her declaration. She sees him smile once more. It’s a lovely smile. He steps closer. She feels the need to close her eyes, but does not.

He says, “I know that smell, jasmine of course. Is it really your natural scent? I always wondered.”

“I’m not wearing any perfume, if that’s what you’re asking,” she says, in a way which comes across as playful.

He looks at her, where the glow of morning touches her delicate features, catches silver hair. She still leans against the low railing of the gazebo, wordless and expecting of something more. Expecting of what? She doesn’t quite know herself.

He says, “I knew it all along. About your perfume anyway. I’ve always been intoxicated by that sweet scent.”

She holds her breath. His sultry voice almost made her gasp, she realizes. There’s that warm feeling again, in the core of her stomach, and the spread of it across her cheeks. *He’s in control*, she realizes.

She keeps her tone light. “I’m not sure whether I should be amused or disturbed by your perceptions of me.”

His smile curves upward a little further. Says nothing.

“But don’t expect that because you know my smell, you know *everything* about me,” she says, steadily.

The poise of her voice betrays her true thoughts, though. Oh, it’s assured, such words are no more than a feint. *He understands me quite well*, she presumes.

“Is that right?” He steps closer to her, disconcertingly.

She moves back against the railing. Her right-hand travels around one of the gazebo’s rosewood pillars, to brace herself. There’s no place for her to go, she realizes. She chooses to stare at the wooden floor instead.

“Where are you going?” he asks. She hears a small strain in his voice. She knows him well, at least enough to notice such things.

“I’m just lounging, that’s all,” she says, her bluff purposefully evident.

A silence. He moves closer. She can feel his hot breath now, the scent of it.

“May I kiss you?” he asks.

Unexpected, but not unwelcomed. Her averted gaze returns to him. Their eyes meet.

“You’ve never once asked before,” she says.

“You’re right,”

A deep breath. “So what makes this situation different?” she asks.

And sees his silver eyes narrow. There’s a sadness within them, not anger, or a heated desire. Just a sadness, which—perhaps—how and why one’s voice or soul can have such a resounding effect on you. *The eyes are the gateway to one’s soul*, she thinks.

There’s a continued silence, no voice to soothe the soul. No amity for the lonesome.

“Then, kiss me,” she says.

He doesn’t move nearer. Even at her beckon, even as she awaits him like so. His eyes return to their unreadable state, the portal to his soul quelled by love. Along with it, his feelings too, evanesces like a fleeting dream.

The eyes are the gateway to one’s soul, she tells herself again.

“I want you to look at me,” she says abruptly. “Let me look into your eyes, so I can see nothing but their colors and pools of silver.”

He waits, doesn’t respond. The request seems sudden, she realizes. Yet, the man she fell in love with would acquiesce with such an order. She remembers that, feels that, as she recalls their ‘staring contests’, as he named them.

She says. No, she pleases: “*Look at me, Subaru.*”

And only then did her gaze meet his silver eyes, inches from each other. His spirited own, faded from their former shades of hazel, yet glistening with the lightest of tears. She could see it, her effect she had on him.

“I said I would burn the world for you,” he says.

Only those words. No touch, and no kiss. It’s all she needed, but more wouldn’t hurt.

She lifts a trembling hand to touch his cheek. She had meant to briefly brush hers over his skin. With these feelings, such fine movements were a hard ask.

He takes her hand in his, and kisses her palm. He inhales, tickling her, but the feeling is euphoric, of his mouth against her skin. She wants more, but knows now is not the time for such things.

She closes her eyes.

* * *

Her taste was exquisite, as always, Subaru thought, and he realized it hadn’t been but a few hours since their last union. Such a separation was much too long for them, he figured. He could indulge a little bit.

And then there was the question of her identity. Within his heart, he knew the book was not lying. Everything it had written down within its pages had come to pass, even in *other* timelines. There was no reason to doubt such a mysterious thing.

He knew who she was, and that didn’t change a thing. He still loved her in his own way, unrelentless, undaunted by such revelations and undeterred. Such trifling matters as her name, they mattered not. He understood a name is not what makes a person, but the identity, the individual

from within who makes each new life unique in their own way.

Yet, he couldn't help but feel curious as to her true background, her *real* nature that must have been hidden from her since birth. It was a curious thing, that this young half-elf whom he loved so dear, had two names, and not just two names, but seemingly two identities. She was Emilia, the half-elf who hailed from the Great Forest of Elmor. And she was Satella, the dreaded Witch of Envy herself. Or, she was just a namesake of something so vile, the very mention of the name elicited the scorn and spurning of all who hear its sound. It was laughable, that her given name would take after someone so detested by the populace. It was out of the question, even.

His curiosity pained him unlike any other. He *wanted* to know the truth, and the book within his kimono understood that. Even now, it was rewriting its pages to match his desires. He needed only but to follow its unworldly direction. Was that their destiny; to follow such a vile object to lands unknown, to unlock the secrets hidden within?

His lips mournfully departed from her own, their long kiss vanquished. She rest back against the waist-level rail of the gazebo once more, her lips slightly parted. Suffocated from their long dance, she panted for breath.

The mind is man's greatest enemy, he thought. He felt contrite, hammered by self-reproach and sadness. He remembered what the two of them truly wanted from this world. They wished to make their own path in life, away from the control of others. Were they enacting the plots of others if they followed the gospel's words? He didn't have the answer for such questions.

He closed his eyes and turned his face away from her.

Then he felt the touch of something soft, but cold, against his skin. It exerted the lightest of pressures, guiding him to a certain direction, and then relaxed against him. He felt the fingers spread themselves possessively across his cheek, and only then did he register what was happening.

She stepped forward and kissed him on the lips. She did it gently, as if to understand why he had turned away, or to lure him back into her grasp once more. Her mouth was soft, her lips parted. His lidded eyes remained that way, such things were unneeded in this moment.

He forced himself to draw back. He said, amorously, "Emilia, I have never met someone who reaches so deeply into me as you do."

Her own eyes opened. The morning was growing long, and the sun now reached just above the canopy surrounding the gazebo. Ever still, the lantern which dangled lonesomely from the rosewood beams shined brightly, illuminating her beautiful amethyst eyes. He saw them in his dreams, and even in his waking state. He wondered whether he'd ever see anything more beautiful.

It wasn't going to be in this lifetime, he realized.

She said, "I am deeply sorry for that, my knight. How else would you want me to be? I can become *anything* you desire."

"Anything I want?" he repeated.

She would maybe regret those words, he figured. Yet, he couldn't help but feel her words were as sincere as ever. Emilia would have moved the world for him, he could tell. If he wanted her to be something, she would do it, even if it was against her own wishes. He wouldn't dare to be so cruel to her, though.

“Within reason of course,” she replied teasingly.

He shook his head, suddenly despondent to such ideas. “Just be yourself, Emilia,” he said, calmly, gently, like the lazy clouds above. “I would never ask you to be anything other than you. You know that, don’t you?”

She looked at him. “Even if a mysterious book tells you I’m someone else?”

He could see through her. She was poking fun at him, he knew that, yet within that playful tone there was a serious matter at hand. Yes, she was at war with the gospel who slept soundly within his kimono. He knew they didn’t appreciate one another, and for reasons he couldn’t possibly understand. They had exchanged terse words, he presumed. Words between themselves, and only for them to be privy to.

He looked back at her. “I’m sorry,” is all he had said.

She was taken aback by his apology. Breathless, she said, “There’s nothing to be sorry for. I didn’t quite understand where you were coming from until this morning. If I knew better, then I would have asked earlier. I was just... I was just so scared to lose you, Subaru.”

“I still must apologize,” he said briefly. He stepped over and embraced her, saying, “I was so confused, between *her* and *you*, and the gospel. It twisted my mind for a time, it really did. And I still have questions, but we will unravel these mysteries together, hand in hand. I won’t force a name upon you, one that bears such guilt and sorrow. I really don’t know what came over me.”

She returned the embrace slowly, her arms wrapping around his shoulders, hooking around his back. Then, he felt her bury her face in his chest, taking a deep breath to consummate their new bond. She then looked up to him, and he down to her. Her pretty pools of lilac were welled with tears, glistening, but gentle, like every inch of her being.

“You shouldn’t bear such faults alone,” she said, sorrowfully. “Tis my fault as well, because I was so scared of losing you... So scared of being alone in this terrible world. I just went along with it, unquestioning, fearful of a renewed separation. It was my fault more so than yours!” The tears she held, fell solemnly, as she stared up at him.

“There, there,” Subaru consoled her. He stroked her hair with one hand, and drew circles on her back the other. “I will call you whatever you want to be called. It doesn’t matter to me. In my heart, our love would be the same regardless, you know that. So, don’t cry. No harm was done, none at all.”

She looked up at him for a long time. Then away into the woods, and then she said, with finality, “I’m sorry for what I did. I will never doubt you ever, ever again!”

“You don’t need to be sorry,” he replied, hugging her tighter than ever.

Sorrow in the morning. Much too early, and much less desirable. Not a good start to the day, but such words needed to be exchanged. The fact remained, their bond had held steadfast, through trial and tribulations unknown to most.

Suddenly, a cute laugh escaped her. “I’m sorry, it’s just so funny,” she said.

“What’s funny?” Subaru replied, coming off a bit cross actually.

“You. Me. Both of us,” Emilia said, covering her mouth to stifle another round of chuckles. “The very fact that we felt the need to apologize to one another, yet we both stressed apologies were

unneded. Isn't it quite humorous?"

He absorbed this, and then smiled. "Ah, I get what you mean," he said, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. "When you put it that way, it really does seem redundant, doesn't it?"

She stifled another cute laugh, and he couldn't help but widen his smile. He realized, when she was happy, so was he. Her laughter was infectious, like a disease, or a long sleepy yawn. But he wished for it, yearned for such happiness.

He said, "If you keep laughing, I'm going to have to kiss you again."

She relaxed herself, then crossed over to the bench on the other side, and sat down, looking up at him curiously now. The moths which were darting around the one dangling lantern, had long since turned in for the day. The air was still cool, and agreeable, much like their surroundings. He wished more of their time spent together was in a peaceful calm like this. *Such things were a joy indeed*, he thought.

"What makes you think I don't want to be kissed again?" she asked. Not the question he'd expected.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, crossing over, and sitting down next to her. "You seem so disturbed when we kiss. Your brow is furrowed, and face so scrunched up you look like a Wolgarm pup. Your nose is cold to the touch, and your eyes shut, and scarcely reopen, as if you are afraid."

"You... I..." she stuttered, clearly unable to get anything out.

He continued anyway, saying, "And your cheeks—well, redder than the appas in the fruit tree over there." He pointed to said tree for effect, if it made a difference.

She stared at him, flabbergasted. Then she inclined her neck, as if she were defeated. "You... You said I look like a Wolgarm pup?" Her cheeks flared, each one reddening to the shade of a large appa.

Subaru laughed softly. "For one thing, now your cheeks look like the appas. And your face, well, we're just going to have to work on that, wouldn't you say?" He leaned in for a kiss. "There you are..."

He tilted her chin upward. Her face scrunched up, her eyes lidded, and the touch of her little nose was cool, as surmised. When their lips met though, he could tell she had forgotten all about his insults. She loosened up, going limp almost. He wrapped his arms around her to prevent her from sliding downward off the bench.

She craned her neck, allowing him easier access. He would thank her for that later, he promised. Indeed, she was receptive to such foreplay. He could feel her want growing, although he would take it no further than their current state. Yet, he had no reason to discontinue such a pleasant thing.

His kiss deepened further, his tongue breaking the plane of her mouth to delve further and explore uncharted territories. Her lips, sweet and succulent, gave pause to his plunder, as he nipped at them and suckled them teasingly. She moaned, and whispered something, but it came out unintelligibly. Seemed to be a staple of hers, he figured.

Turbulent gusts of hot air blew from her nose, splashing across his face. He had covered her airway for some time, so it was only a natural reaction. He departed her lips, releasing her from his torment. It was a woeful separation, but necessary.

Subaru stood up and looked her over. The rise and fall of her chest was tantalizing.

“Why did you stop?” she asked, breathlessly at that.

“It’s not that I wanted to stop,” he replied. “It’s just that, I really doubt Russell Fellow would approve of us having such a heated passion in his garden. It’s one thing to do it in the privacy of our quarters, but out here? Even I know better than that.”

Emilia sat up straight, and fixed herself up. Her hair was a mess, disheveled from their petting. She then said, “If you insist. Truthfully, we are pretty secluded out here. It’s almost a five-minute walk from the manor.”

He thought about it, but decided against it. “No, no, there will be more time later for such things. Besides, there’s some things we need to attend to anyway.”

She had that curious look upon her face again. It was the face she made when he got one of his bright ideas. “Oh, some *things*, you say,” she said, raising one of her brows skeptically. “What are some of these *things* that you refer to? I’m interested in hearing all about them.”

He said, “Well, you know. I really do want to unlock the mysteries of the gospel, about why it says your name is Satella, and not Emilia. I know it’s a touchy subject, but it unnerves me that we don’t have an explanation for it.”

Emilia stood, and said, “It’s just ghosts, Subaru. If you let them haunt you, they won’t go away. Let’s just forget about it, and go on our own way.”

He was silent a minute, considering that, then said, “We can’t just ‘go on our own way’. Our path is already laid out.” He reached his hand inside his kimono, reaching for something precious. It stayed there; he knew better than to take it out.

“You might think it’s decided, but it’s not,” Emilia said it matter-of-factly. “I know for sure that we don’t have to follow whatever guidance is written down on those pages. If it says to walk south, we can just walk north.”

Subaru smiled, and said, “You say that, but it’s not true. If we just ignore the book, whatever it has written down in it will come to pass, whether we like it or not.”

He could see her thinking about it.

He said, “There’s something truly magical about this book. It’s not a self-fulfilling prophecy. If I read the thing, it gives me foresight on what’s going to happen. It doesn’t give me directions. Regardless if I read it or not, the events are still going to happen.”

“What if it tells you to kill me? Are you going to do it?” She turned to look at him, arms crossed and angry.

Subaru frowned. “Oh please, Emilia,” he said, unable to hide his chiding tone. “This isn’t a joking matter. There’s virtually no downside in reading the book. But even if it said something like that, I would find a way to change it, believe me.”

She took his hand. Looked at their interlaced fingers, and smiled, “I know you would. I shouldn’t have said that, it was in bad taste. My apologies, truly. But please promise me, that if you have to choose between that book and me, you would choose me.”

“I just said—”

“Promise me, Subaru.” She looked up at him with wide eyes, pleading, and full of life.

His shoulders slumped, as he resigned himself to his fate. “I would burn the book if I had to,” he whispered softly, the words barely audible. “I would burn the book. I would burn this entire city. I would burn this entire world, if I had to choose between you and it.”

He saw her smile brightly, but her eyes spoke differently. His words brought joy to her, but he could also see a level of fear stretch across her face. Maybe, just maybe, he put it a little *too* bluntly.

Her smile turned somber. “You don’t need to burn the world, Subaru,” she said, looking down as she had done so. “Remember what I told you deep in the cavern, when we were alone? I told you, I want you to give the world to me. *You* are my world, and to do such a thing, you must give me yourself. That’s all.”

He felt her squeeze his hand hard as she uttered that. It was almost painful, because a ring she was wearing bit into his skin. She didn’t mean to hurt him, he knew, but he was curious where that trinket had come from.

“I’ll give you the world, then,” he said simply.

It was his declaration of love to her, renewed once more. What else could he possibly do, except give her the world? And if he was her world, that’s exactly what he would do.

Emilia must have noticed the pain she was causing him. She released his hand, and looked down at the rosewood floor. It was submissive behavior, he noticed. Unusually submissive for someone like her. He wanted to ask her what was wrong, but didn’t.

There came the sounds of footsteps toward the bamboo grove. Two pairs of footsteps, to be exact, then a voice beyond the orange glow of the morning sun. “My Lady, Master Subaru. Russell Fellow is due to return from his meeting anytime now. It would be preferred if you two depart the garden beforehand.”

It was one of the servants from the manor, the bald one, and his apprentice. “Was it really necessary to disturb us?” Subaru asked quickly.

“My deepest apologies, Master Subaru. I am just doing my lord’s bidding.”

“We will be right down.”

The servants nodded to him, and then returned down the path and into the bamboo grove.

He was quite upset that they ruined their moment. It’s precisely why he didn’t want to delve too deep into another round of lovemaking out here. He expected something like this, of course.

He heard Emilia say, “Is it time to go?” Her voice was soft, and gentle.

“It seems that way,” he had said. “It was time well spent, if anything.”

“But I have something else to share with you,” she said hurriedly. “It’s...”

“You can share it with me on our way back toward the manor,” he replied.

Subaru turned, and went from her.

She watches him go down the steps and back onto the stone pathway. She hadn't even had the time to explain *what* she wished to share with him. She looks to the lonesome crystal on the floor of the rosewood gazebo. Its verdant green color shines brightly against the wood, making it easy to spot. She leaves it, and walks down the steps to follow him. She gets halfway before she turns around, and looks back at it all.

The lantern dangling above flickers, the lagmite soon requiring replacement. Other than that, she breathes in deeply one last time, to carry the scent of the rosewood into her memories. Its scent is something she is very fond of, and wishes to remember it until the end of her days.

She turns a final time, and hurries down the steps. She swears out loud, eager to catch up to Subaru, who has failed to wait for her. It's unlike him, she decides. Usually, he would have waited for her.

She calls out, "Subaru! Wait for me, please."

A moment, not much sound either, or Subaru appearing from the grove. Then, a hand sticks out from the brush, followed by a voice, "I'm still here. Just waiting on you, that's all."

"I'm...I'm coming."

Her shaky voice may have betrayed her feelings to him. Her hands begin to tremble. She can feel the perspiration form on the tips of her fingers. She wipes them on her dark gown, and tries to get ahold of herself.

She rounds the corner of the grove, and there she sees him. He's sitting coolly as always, up against one of the stalks of bamboo. *Always the one to impress*, she muses.

She has to catch her breath before she speaks. She says, "I want to share something with you, Subaru. No, I *need* to share it with you."

"What is it, Emilia?"

Her heart stops. Her breath too, lungs deciding it's no longer necessary to function.

"Erm... Well, it's..." she says, stuttering over every syllable.

Subaru looks at her, confusion spread across his face.

The tall bamboo stalks, reaching far up above them, blow in the wind. Their roots grow deep in the soil below, sturdy and strong against even the strongest gusts. Yet, its sound as the long, green leaves billow and dance soothes her enough to speak.

"Remember before, on the road to Cramlin?" she asks. "We spoke about what would happen if... if I... you know. If I happened to..." Her voice sounds odd even to her. She doesn't know how to approach such a subject, even if she wanted to.

"I remember our journey to Cramlin quite well," Subaru replies.

Emilia nods and looks down at her hands. They are twisted and knotted together, a sign of her nervousness, she believes. She peers harder at her left hand, where the golden flower ring sits around her ring finger. It's magically blessed, she thinks, as it grows to the ring size of its bearer.

Subaru, noticing this, tenses up, as he looks at her fidget with the thing.

She smiles as she removes it, and holds it out for him to take. "Erm, I want you to have this," she

says, both confidently *and* nervously. “I was always told to do the right thing. That, if we are to enter into a holy union, blessed by the Divine Dragon, that a ring must be bestowed in proposal.”

With her palm open, she reveals it to him. The ring is stunningly beautiful, even she thinks so. Showered in jewels by Roswaal during her time with him, she knew what quality was and what wasn't. This ring, it was a gorgeous thing to behold. It would match his taste. She believes—in fact she is certain—that he will love it.

Subaru hesitates, as he looks at the tiny band. It has a golden flower, stem and leaf, travelling around its contour and shape. He's speechless, she knows, as she looks at him with a bright and loving smile all her own.

“Don't be shy, Subaru,” she hears herself whisper.

He's speechless, she can tell, and hear that. She hears nothing, actually. He's wordless, still and silent like a statue amongst the shadows of the rising bamboo. Another gust of wind, yet he moves not a muscle.

She steps closer to him, ring still in hand. She's prodding him to move, to take the thing. To accept her offer of holy union, to become one with another for all eternity. She wishes only for this, for him to be her world, now and forever until the endless waters of the Waterfall dry up and the moon fades into obscurity and the stars fall one after another. He needs but take the ring. She hopes for this, desires this very action.

And finally, his fingertips briefly tickle the palm of her left hand. The ring is taken into his own grasp, where it will stay. He smiles. It's a toothy grin, from ear to ear almost—one he used to give her when they first met. She feels the tears well up in her eyes, and she knows what she must utter now.

It's a revelation, one that, while not unexpected, she expects it to shock him to the very fabric of his being. Life will never be the same, after these words come from her mouth. She knows this, expects this, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

Her lips move, and she hears a voice that she thinks is her own:

“Subaru, I'm with child.”

* * *

The cold and cramped stiffness of the dreary room left a distasteful feeling in Wilhelm's mouth. It took him a moment just to remember where he was, and what they were discussing. It was dark in the room, and not just of the fact it was illuminated by low-lit candles. The mood was equally dull and depressing, hampered by a number of factors he much wished to forget. A rueful expression crossed his face.

It was strange, he reflected, twisting his head from side to side to try and see who sat about the long table in the grand hallway of the garrison. He scarcely recognized anyone. Not much else to do but ease back into his chair. Still, he was careful to reflect on the innumerable amount of angry fellows who argued amongst each other.

He had felt surprisingly awake though, given the fact he had been up for days. He just couldn't find the time to sleep these days, troubled by events both far and wide. In his room, he mulled over it all, considered even forgoing the meeting all together, and to just head to bed and forget about it. He certainly had half the mind to. In the end, it was a redundant thing; nothing would get done

here. They wouldn't listen to reason, nor would his presence lead to any other conclusion.

So he had left his room in a brooding silence, ignoring the patient servant who awaited him to carry his things. He hadn't the time for such trifling matters anymore. Servants and squires, a waste of talent if anything. There he mindlessly walked down the stone hallways, until he found himself sitting at the center of a meeting of knights, old and young.

He had hoped to leave all this behind him almost fifteen years ago. Yet, here he was, dragged back into it all. He was partly to blame, he conceded.

The commander walked over, and stood at the end of the long table. He looked at everyone, sighed, and took out his pipe. The knights who argued with one another, paused to watch in silence. He tilted his pipe to the side, and dangled it over a flaming candle which sat upon a tall stand. The tender smoldered, crackled as he took his first puffs of the evening. He would take many more before the night's end.

"Everyone, be seated," he commanded.

Chairs slid harshly against the floors all at once as everyone took their seats. Wilhelm was already seated, almost *too* comfortably in his chair as is. He might even find himself dozing off if he stayed like this.

Another puff of billowing smoke escaped the commander's lips, but he was otherwise silent. He just looked at everyone, whom all stared intently back at him, awaiting his wisdom. His greyed hair had spread to his chin, and the sides of his cheeks, and to his jaw. Stubble it was, covered from one side of his face to another.

No time to be shaving. Wilhelm shared that sentiment.

"I see familiar faces around here," Conwood said aloud. "I see allies from Priestella, Flanders, and even Picoutatte. Altogether too few. What news from the other divisions?"

One knight wearing a green cape stood, saluted, and said, "Sir, the divisions from Costuul, Hakchuri, and Pappelt are all running behind schedule. They won't arrive here until tomorrow morning." After finishing his report, he sat back down.

Wilhelm barely listened to anything the man had said. It was uninteresting bureaucratic nonsense anyway. None of these formal functions truly mattered, he knew that.

Conwood took another long draw from his pipe, and said, "I see, I appreciate the intelligence. Now, to further the night along, because I know none of us want to be here. Let's get down to business."

Then a knight at the other end of the table abruptly stood, yelled, "None of us want to be here? Five of our best and youngest were slaughtered by a half-witch and her cultist. Yet, you think we don't want to be here. We want their heads! Only give us the word, and we will hunt them down and do what must be done."

Wilhelm did hear that, and he might as well have cut the man in two with his eyes. He kept his mouth shut, however, uninterested in joining their squabble. They wouldn't listen to reason, he yet again reminded himself, regardless of what he had to say.

The commander drew from his pipe once more, and stepped away from the table. He paced up and down, around the table, aimlessly in thought. Then, he turned to the unruly knight, and stared him down with a ferocity in his eye, and said:

“Be seated, or I will seat you myself, so you may never walk again.”

His threat was serious, almost deadly to a point. Wilhelm couldn't help but let a small chuckle escape his lips. Others noticed it too, so did the commander, who shot him a knowing smirk. Neither man was a stranger to this kind of discussion, Wilhelm knew, thus such arguments were commonplace. Some ended in violence, others in peaceful discourse.

The knight, having long since took his rightful place: his rear planted firmly in his chair, and lips tightly sealed, caused no further discord amongst the pondering knights. Tensions were high, everyone understood that. There was a deep confusion on what had happened that night, and few answers.

Conwood nodded, as he sipped from a mug of mead in one hand and toked a pipe in his other. “I really do understand everyone's frustration,” he said, surprisingly calmly. “One of those who was killed, Thaler, I saw grow from a squire to the honorable rank of Knight Errant. He was a family friend, and for that, I can relate to each and every one of you. The fallen were kin, and I would not forget such a thing.”

“Then why do we sit idle, and do nothing?” asked a red-cloaked knight. An envoy from the Royal Guard.

If a face could murder someone, Conwood wore such a guise. “Our meeting tonight proves that we will take action, and not just have idle talks. I believe patience was taught in the military academies you attended. By all means, correct me if I'm wrong.”

The knight made a sour face, but decided not to comment further. He just crossed his arms, and looked forward, honoring one of the key virtues of knighthood—patience.

“I suppose each and every one of you knows,” Conwood started, with a slight apprehension, and said, “Near the end of our campaign on the Witch Cult of Mount Cordor, one of our reconnaissance parties was completely wiped out—struck down and dispatched without mercy. It was a callous attack, both abominable and sickening to behold. Even still, such an attack would have gone without notice, if it wasn't for a knight who had briefly stepped away from camp. He witnessed the attackers: a half-elf with silver hair, and her adjutant; a young man with black hair. Rest assured, the silver-haired elf will be easy to find, and when she is discovered, so will the other.”

Wilhelm said nothing, only buried his face in the palm of his right hand as the commander gave his spiel. What else was there to say? Was he to defend them for their actions; explain that it was a misunderstanding? Could he claim it was self-defense, and that it was just an unfortunate mistake? Not in the midst of these hot-blooded knights hell-bent on revenge, he understood that quite plainly.

Conwood was very still, then he looked down the longhall. “It was an action born of an evil mind,” he said resolutely. “An evil mind who enacted such vile deeds through the use of an evil sword. Therefore, as the ranking officer and the one who bears the most responsibility for this heinous crime, I sentence those responsible to death.” He raised his arm high in front of him, making such a declaration official

His flourish drew cheers and laughter from his men, and they drew their swords to point them at the sky. In honor of the fallen, Wilhelm presumed. It was reminiscent of the old ways, yet he wished it wasn't born from such a circumstance as this.

Another knight rose his hand to speak amongst the cheers. “Would it be better to capture them alive?” he asked tersely. “We must allow them to answer for their crimes in front of the Divine

Keep. A quick death is too merciful for their kind.”

The commander raised his hand to silence the crowd, and said, “Only capture them alive if you are afforded the circumstance. Intelligence says they are practitioners of dark magic, vile magic which is of the ilk not seen for hundreds of years. It’s best to be precautious when dealing with them officially.”

Satisfied with his response, the knight nodded and saluted. The commander returned the salute, a kind gesture of respect.

Wilhelm just balked at their displays of chivalry and bellicose doings. They were idle boasts, and not much more than that. He was eager to remove himself from the room and return to his chambers, where he might find sleep. Then, later, when he had the energy to think positively, he might return to the subject at hand; to get to the bottom of what happened. He had to be quick though, to reach them before the others. Luckily, he was a step ahead of the them; he had a hunch where they might have travelled.

He didn’t speak, not even to add a comment or two to make it appear that he was interested. He let Conwood handle the theatrics; he was always good at that. It’s not that he wished to forgo the truth of the matter. The matter was quite the opposite. He was in a precarious situation, after all. He had sworn fealty to Emilia, and received a Lord’s blessing, as humble of a retainer as he was. It was because of that, he could not forsake her, even if it went unknown to his comrades, and even to the commander himself.

When it was all said and done, and when the meeting was adjourned, Wilhelm fled to his quarters. It was late in the night, when the frosty winds of the blue-sun chilled even the old and winding corridors of the garrison. A bed fit for a jailcell, a drawer beside it, and not much else. A soldier’s quarters. It left much to be desired, but he never fancied the extravagance of high living anyway.

Wilhelm realized he wasn’t cold anymore, or tired; he hadn’t the energy to think about such things. So, when he heard the banging on his door, he almost found himself ignoring it. Too bad he invited himself in.

He heard the soft sound of the lock mechanisms turning—the click and the pop—followed by the door opening. *He had a master key*, he thought. He didn’t even have to look to guess who it was. By the time he did look, the man had already stepped inside, and shot the door behind him. Wearing the insignia of the Kingdom Knight’s, and the officer’s cloak and epaulets, it identified him as the commander without even a passing look at his face. He was off duty now, allowed to say things he shouldn’t say and meet in secluded locations to discuss things others *probably* shouldn’t hear. It was a common situation they found themselves in the past.

“How did I do?” Conwood asked, taking in the scene before him. He was amused at Wilhelm’s tired appearance.

Wilhelm said nothing, but by the wavering candlelight he read a disquieting worry in his eyes.

He didn’t need to say anything for Conwood to know what he was thinking.

“Well,” the commander murmured, his eyes sullen and tired as well. “I suppose you don’t have any better ideas, do you? Should I have just told them we weren’t going to do anything?”

He leaned back in his chair, chuckling darkly at his own wit. Wilhelm didn’t bother to animate a response—he was just eager to sleep.

The two sat in a comfortable silence, unsure of what to say or do. They just needed to be together, their comradery providing the support they needed in such times. Soon, Conwood's small smile faded, and it was replaced by an all too knowing frown. He knew there were dark times ahead, and last month's omen was just the beginning of such darkness to come.

He lazily lit his pipe once more, uncaring of the fact they were in an enclosed room. Smoke billowed from his nostrils, and a small smile graced his lips once more. Such a thing relaxed him more than anyone could ever know.

Wilhelm ran his hand through his aged and gray hair. His hair was thinning, a painful reminder that his younger days were all but behind him.

"But what can we do?" he then uttered, somewhat abruptly.

"Curse and yell at the moon, and pray for a miracle?" said the commander bitterly.

"There might not be much else we could do," replied the old knight. It was the truth, the indignant truth which unnerved him.

A coarse, spiteful laughter escaped Conwood. "Maybe it would have been better if we never went there at all? Our rescue mission turned out to be a disaster, you know."

"A disaster?" Wilhelm then said, a strong disbelief evident in his tone. "It was worse than a disaster. It couldn't have gone more terrible. If it wasn't for that infernal worm, I could have been by their side..." He buried his face in his hands, resigned to something akin to sorrow, if he could feel such things anymore.

Conwood gnawed on the mouthpiece of his pipe. He muttered, "Don't beat yourself up about it too much."

"How can I not?" he whispered.

The commander could barely hear it, but he understood anyway. "You did the best you could. There's no dishonor in doing your best, even if it ends in failure. In a way, there hasn't even been a failure yet. The two still draw breath, is there anymore we can ask of them?"

Wilhelm sighed deeply, said, "Enough of this conversation. I don't wish to hear it anymore."

Conwood rest his pipe on the desk, and said, "Have it your way, old friend. I don't mean to pry too much on your next step, but I only came to you tonight to offer my support. So, here's my support."

It was enough for Wilhelm to nod weakly, and give him his thanks. It was something, and that was important. He truly needed it in this moment, and there wasn't anyone living who could give him such things.

After a moment, he smiled somberly, and said, "That battle truly did feel like the old days, you know? You swinging around that great sword, the rush of battle. Exhilarating, wasn't it? The only thing missing was your flail."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about it?" Conwood said, smiling in return. "But if you really want to know, I got rid of that thing years ago, before we retired. It was a nuisance anyway."

He felt a rush of memories. He remembered the times they fought together, all the battles they'd shared. The wars they waged, side by side, as brothers in arms, and best friends. They were feelings he lamented, their loss all together another aspect of growing older. If he could just do it

all over again.

Wilhelm grinned, but it was largely hidden underneath his beard. “Those days feel like an eternity ago,” he said. “I fondly remember our times together, and I will never forget them. Whatever happens going forward, I will keep them close to me.”

What he had to do now, he had to do it alone. He couldn’t bring Conwood with him, he knew that. This was something he and he alone could accomplish. To drag another into it, would result in a disaster he could have no control over. Even his best friend, who had been there with him through thick and thin, had to sit this one out. Amazingly, he knew if he asked him to join, his acceptance was more than likely. It was for that reason he wouldn’t even entertain the notion of it.

There was a pause, followed by another long silence. Then a deep breath, followed by a voice.

“I’m going after them,” is all Wilhelm said.

His face was stern. It was stony to the point where it appeared his visage was chiseled from the rocks of Mount Cordor itself. In that respect, he had an absolute resolve on what needed to be done. Conwood saw this, understood this, as he looked upon his old friend with admiration. Within that admiration, was a deeper respect for the soul of a knight long since lost. Their current breed could do nothing to match his steely self. He was a product of his time, born of the Demi-Human War, forged in fire and blood. His sword is his soul, and within that soul, the sounds of steel clanging against one another can be heard, felt even, as if he waged a war within himself as he sat there silently on the bed.

Conwood knew this, and for those reasons, he would not stop him.

“I won’t keep you,” the commander replied evenly. “I’ll make up some excuse for your leave. I know you haven’t made your return to the legion official, but I’ll still have to come up with something.”

Wilhelm smiled at his old friend, his best friend, and looked upon him with an equal level of respect. With his right hand, he gripped his shoulder, and gave him a fond squeeze.

“Farewell my friend, until next time,” he said.

Conwood returned the gesture with his left hand. Grasping him hard, he said:

“Until next time.”

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